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21

*Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles*

The Dragon's Disciple



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IS THIS ANOTHER
SIDE EFFECT OF
ASSIMILATION...?

He froze in surprise: his hair
didn't return to its natural black
color. In fact, his hair turned an
even lighter shade of grey.





**"YES. THIS IS
AN EXTREMELY
IMPORTANT ITEM,
SO YOU MUST TAKE
IT AND LEAVE FOR
GALARC FIRST,"**

**Christina said, using a
cord to tie it around Flora's
neck like a pendant.**

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Prologue

Between the northwestern end of the Yagumo region and the eastmost end of the Wilderness stretched an uninhabited mountainous region. The highest of the peaks towered at over ten thousand meters above sea level. At its summit stood a small cabin that had been home to a young girl for the past thousand years.

It might seem strange to call a woman who had lived for over a millennium a young girl, but certain circumstances had frozen her physical and mental growth. Her appearance was that of a ten-year-old child, and her mind was still childlike despite all her years of knowledge and experience.

She lived alone. She very rarely descended the mountain to seek supplies from human villages, but she never sought any particular human interaction. However, she was comfortable with her isolation.

“I’d like you to watch over the people that live in this land.”

One thousand years ago, someone made this request of her: a person that was like a master to the young girl. He never gave the girl direct orders, but she considered his words to be absolute anyway. She worshiped him and his strength more than anything else.

“I’m going to end this war.”

If her object of worship was saying that, then this war was sure to end soon. That was what she believed. And sure enough, some time after he departed, the war truly ended.

Peace returned to the world, but...

Although the war had ended, that person never returned to the girl. The special connection between them of master and servant had been severed. Thus, the girl knew she had lost the person she considered her god.

“After this war ends, I’d like you to live your life as you wish. Your life belongs to you, Sora. As your master, I release you.”

He had left behind other words before his departure.

“It might be a good idea to make new friends too.”

To the girl, this person was her foster parent—her one and only master, her only family member, and the only person she had a connection to. But the same applied to this person, whose only connection was to the girl.

Thus, the person felt regretful that the girl had no other connections than to him. Like a parent wishing for their child’s growth, he hoped that the girl would interact with others besides himself.

“I don’t need anyone else!” the girl replied reflexively. “You are enough for me. Staying by your side is my happiness. So please, return to me safely,” she pleaded with him.

One thousand years later, the girl could still remember that moment clearly. Everything was all thanks to him, who had contributed the most to ending the war. Even when everyone else in the world had forgotten about him, the girl remembered.

In the days immediately after the end of the war, she had been so annoyed at her master’s lack of acknowledgment, she had gone around the Yagumo region to leave behind a legend of his contributions. But those who lived in those times were now gone.

However, the girl remembered everything even now.

And so, it was fine. Although she had been left alone in this world...

It was fine.

She would live like her master. With that belief, the girl continued living quietly in the corner of the peaceful world her master had helped establish.

However, one day, everything changed.

“Huh...?”

The broken connection of a thousand years suddenly restored itself.

“Dragon King...?”

The girl rushed out of her cabin and stared up at the skies of the Strahl region.

Chapter 1: Lost Memories, Lingering Feelings

Two powers beyond human understanding collided with each other.

One was a tidal wave of earth that overturned the land. The other was a surge of light that swallowed the land. The former was released by the upper high class spirit of earth possessing Erica, while the latter was released by Rio and Aishia's combined powers. Neither side should have had an advantage over the other. The two powers were meant to be equal.

Yet, there was something strange going on. Something abnormal. A phenomenon of an absurd scale had happened right there, yet all traces of it were gone. The scenery was completely normal, as though the cataclysm had never occurred at all. There were no signs of turbulence in the ode and mana in the air either.

However, none of that mattered to the group, currently standing around with an extreme sense of discomfort.

"Wait... Who was that fighting over there?" Latifa asked uneasily.

This was the source of the unsettling feeling everyone was experiencing. They couldn't recall whose fight they had just been watching; they had no memories of it.

Who had been fighting, and why?

They couldn't remember. In fact, they didn't even know if someone *had* been fighting in the first place. They couldn't even tell if they had forgotten, or if they just didn't know.

One moment, they were watching two forces collide with each other in the distance. In the next moment, it was as though nothing had happened at all.

"..."

Celia, Miharuru, Liselotte, Satsuki, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Charlotte, Gouki, Kayoko, and Aria were all unable to answer Latifa's question. Even if they had wanted

to, they were unable to give the name of the person who had been fighting.

They were unable to recall their memories from before the fight had started. When they tried to recall what had happened, they found their minds as blank as a canvas.

It was as though time had stopped—no, it was as though time had skipped forward.

The group stood on the bank of the lake, unable to comprehend what they had just witnessed.

Why...? they all wondered to themselves.

They had seen powers collide in the distance, so there *should* have been someone fighting, but all they could remember was a torrent of light swallowing the tsunami of earth before everything disappeared. And at that exact point in time, a portion of their memories had been cleanly erased...or so it seemed.

It was like they had been watching a dream, then woke up unable to remember the details.

“...”

Everyone had frustrated expressions on their faces.

Why?

They didn't know who had been fighting, yet they couldn't get that moment out of their mind. Something deep in their hearts was protesting. They wanted to know who it was.

That was why their feet moved of their own accord. Each person in the group started walking towards where their gazes had been locked earlier, as though they were being lured forward.

“Halt,” King Francois commanded, implicitly questioning their intentions.

“...” The group turned around, unsure of how to respond. Part of the reason was because he was the king, but everyone had been rushing to move without even looking at each other. For some reason, they all felt the impulse to go to where the fight had taken place. They weren't moving rationally.

“We need to investigate what happened over there. It makes sense to send the skilled people that have gathered here,” Charlotte said, explaining their motives to her father cleverly.

“That may be true, but...” Francois recognized the need to investigate the situation. He too wished to know what had happened over there. The reason why he had stopped them was because he felt uneasy about sending them all into the unknown. There was no guarantee the fight was over. He couldn’t give the order to march forward so easily.

If they were to send an investigation team, it would be preferable to select a handful of experts. There was no need to send out people with no combat ability. The first people that came to Francois’s mind were Gouki and Kayoko, but—

“Please give us your permission to go.”

“Please!”

The first ones to step forward were Celia and Miharuru. They had desperate looks on their faces, yearning to leave as soon as possible.

“Hmm...” Francois hesitated. He knew that Celia was an excellent sorcerer, but if he had to make a choice, he’d prefer to send Gouki and Kayoko as scouts. Of course, Miharuru was completely out of the question.

“I’m going too!”

“Us too.”

Latifa also offered her company. Sara, Orphia, and Alma exchanged looks with each other before echoing her words.

“Please let us go, Your Majesty.” The hero, Satsuki, also asked to go.

“Hmm...” From his position as king, Francois definitely didn’t want to send the nation’s precious hero into the aftermath of a battle. There was no telling what dangers lay ahead. But if he truly believed that, then why was Satsuki here in the first place?

I must have brought Lady Satsuki here at her request... Wait, was that really why? Was that what happened? Wasn’t there another reason...?

Francois couldn't recall the reason why he'd brought Satsuki to the battlefield anymore. Thus, he hesitated to make a rational decision.

However, he was just as confused as everyone else by the sudden situation. He couldn't remember the things he should've had memories of. Nevertheless, he had a vague feeling that something important had happened—the same feeling that was spurring the others into action.

"It's the personal request of the hero, Father," Charlotte added, hoping to persuade Francois. An intelligent royal like Charlotte knew perfectly well that such words had no persuasive power. She also knew how little necessity there was to send everyone here to investigate. Yet despite that—

"For some reason, I feel the urge to head over there as well. I wish to know the reason why. Would you please give us your permission to go?"

Charlotte fully intended on going as well. The "we" she used in her earlier request had actually included everyone present.

"What are you..."

As a figure to be protected, Charlotte would be nothing more than a hindrance. Words to dismiss her absurdity were on the tip of Francois's tongue—but his mouth wouldn't move. Her request was clearly ridiculous, yet for some reason, he couldn't brush her aside.

"Liselotte, you make an appeal too."

"Huh?"

"Your beauty may lay in your ability to remain elegant at all times, but you wish to go too, don't you? In which case, you must speak up as well," Charlotte said, seeing through what Liselotte was thinking in her silence.

"Yes, I would like to go as well."

Liselotte nodded firmly, expressing her strong determination. She was normally the most rational person of them all, yet here she was trying to act irrationally—just like everyone else present.

It was irrational. But why? Perhaps emotions lingered even after memories disappeared. However, the people in question didn't know that.

Emotions were a transient state. They eventually faded with time. Perhaps the panic that everyone was feeling was because they instinctively knew that. They feared their most important emotions would leave them, so they were trying to rush towards where their emotions were directing them.

And it seemed that Francois was no exception to the group. As the king, he had to be the most rational person present, yet he was considering sending everyone off as scouts. He wanted to respect their wills, but he didn't have any evidence that this was the best choice.

In the end...

"Very well... Make sure you take the utmost care."

With a heavy sigh, Francois allowed everyone to go investigate the situation.



A mere one, two minutes ago, on the outskirts of Greille, capital of Duke Gregory's territory in the Galarc Kingdom, one kilometer from the lake where the enchanted ships of the Galarc army were stopped...

She's dead. This time, for sure...

The sword Rio had stabbed through Erica's heart had disappeared. It had turned into particles of light like a spirit returning to its spirit form.

"Whoa!"

With the disappearance of his sword, Erica's corpse fell forward. He tried to catch her and stumbled off-balance, teetering on the verge of falling with her.

"Haruto." Aishia materialized, supporting Rio's body from behind.

"Sorry. I suddenly lost my strength." Rio hurried to straighten his posture, holding Erica in his arms. But Aishia pulled his body back towards her, making him lean against her for support. She looped her arms around his waist with care.

"Don't push yourself."

"I'm fine, I'm just a little tired," Rio replied gently, not wanting her to worry.

"It's probably the recoil from activating the powers of a transcendent one."

Your body is shouldering the burden,” Aishia said. Her elegant face was bordered with darkness.

“Transcendent one... I see. But I’m fine, really.” Rio was befuddled by the unfamiliar term for a brief moment, then gently repeated to Aishia that he was fine.

“I’m sorry. It’s my duty to lessen your burden, yet...”

“I don’t really get it, but the burden on my body has reduced thanks to you, right? Can you explain what exactly happened?” Rio called out to her in an even brighter tone after seeing her miserable expression.

“I will. But...”

“Is something wrong?”

“It’d be better not to meet the others. We have to leave this place. I will explain after,” Aishia suggested somewhat hesitantly.

“I see... Will the others be in any danger if we leave?”

“No. The danger is over for now. It’d be a bigger problem if we ran into everyone right now.”

Rio thought for a moment, then nodded with a smile. “Okay. Let’s go.”

He had the faint hunch there was an unavoidable reason for that.

“Can you move yet?” Aishia asked, worried about how Rio was on the verge of falling earlier.

“Yeah. I feel a lot better now. But before that...”

With Erica in his arms, Rio stepped forward, supporting his own weight. He then used spirit arts to freeze Erica’s corpse.

“*Conditum*,” he uttered to activate the Time-Space Cache. The solid block of ice containing Erica’s body was sucked into another space, vanishing before them.

“What are you going to do?”

“I can’t leave her as is... I’m pretty sure she’s dead this time, but I’ll keep an eye on her for a bit before I bury her in her home country. I promised her that

much.”

He was sure Erica was dead, but he couldn’t say the same for the other mysterious presence within her. He figured it would be best to store her corpse and keep an eye out for any sign of Erica’s reviving once again.

“Everyone’s trying to come over here,” Aishia said, looking in the direction of the lake. Their view was obstructed by the clouds of dust in the air, but she could see the group trying to run over here in the distance. They had just begun to move. Orphia had summoned Ariel, so it would take them less than a minute to arrive.

“Let’s go.”

Sara and the spirit folk in the group would have noticed Aishia’s materialized presence. Rio activated his spirit arts and began to fly.

“I will disappear.”

Aishia turned into her spirit form and moved into Rio’s body. Rio then accelerated away, running from the approaching group.

Just then, magic essence started to swell out of a point a few meters away from them. The source of the essence was a dirt-colored crystal-like stone lying on the ground. Its color had hidden it from Rio’s notice until it released a blinding light—

“Wh...?!”

Rio and Aishia immediately distanced themselves from the source of magic essence. The light expanded farther and farther in that time, until eventually, the light pouring out of the stone formed a single pillar, stretching towards the sky.



At the sight of the giant pillar of light shooting up into the air, the group that was heading for Rio and Aishia’s location couldn’t help but come to a stop shortly after their departure. Miharu, Celia, Charlotte, and Liselotte had been riding on Ariel’s back as it flew at a low altitude.

“W-Wait! What’s happening?!”

Shaken by the sudden turn of events, Satsuki covered her face with one hand and summoned her Divine Arms in the other. The others were also bracing themselves for combat warily.

However, in contrast to the scale of the phenomenon, there was practically no change to their physical surroundings. There was no strong wind, no heat wave, no destruction of the land. There was merely a giant pillar of light standing calmly.

“Is that...teleportation sorcery?”

Orphia, who had cast an essence barrier to protect everyone on the spur of the moment, detected a fluctuation of ode and mana unique to space sorcery.

“I-It’s fine! It’s not a destructive phenomenon!” Sara yelled at everyone.

“That being said, it’s a tremendous amount of power...”

Alma covered her view with her hand. She could barely open her eyes. There was no way for her to confirm what was happening at the source of the light like this.

After some time, the pillar of light faded.

“Did it disappear?” Satsuki mumbled.

“Hmm...”

Deeming the danger to have passed for now, Gouki and Kayoko sheathed their weapons. But as they still didn’t know what was going on, they remained vigilant. They kept an eye on their surroundings carefully, ready to react to whatever might happen. Meanwhile...

“That pillar of light just now...”

Among the group were people who reacted as though the phenomenon was familiar: Celia, Liselotte, Charlotte, and Aria.

“Have you seen it before?” Miharu asked Celia, both on Ariel’s back.

“It’s similar to the hero summoning... No, it looked exactly the same. The color of the pillar was different from what I saw at the capital, but...”

What Celia had once witnessed was the pillar of light that went up when Rui

Shigekura was summoned to the Beltrum Castle.

“Yes. I saw the same phenomenon when Lady Satsuki was summoned,” Liselotte pointed out.

“Then...a new hero was summoned?”

“Who knows?”

Satsuki and Latifa exchanged confused looks.

“Sara, Alma. The spirit presence detected earlier has disappeared,” Orphia reported, looking back at Ariel behind her.

The one who had detected the presence had been her contract spirit, Ariel. The presence it had detected was, of course, Aishia.

“Right... It seemed to disappear right before that pillar appeared.”

Sara placed her hand across her chest and closed her eyes before speaking. She must have been speaking to her contract spirit, Hel.

The contract spirits of the spirit folk girls—Hel, Ariel, and Ifritah—were mid class spirits that were unable to speak in the human language, but were capable of communicating their thoughts. They were connected to their contract partners on a spiritual level. Alma made a similar gesture as she communicated with her contract spirit, Ifritah.

“Let’s go and check what happened. We have to head there anyway,” Charlotte directed.

Thus, the group continued towards their destination. Gouki, Kayoko, and Aria took the lead, proceeding rapidly but cautiously.

“Oh! There’s someone over there—two people!” Latifa exclaimed, pointing. Everyone’s gazes followed her finger to see a boy and girl standing together.

“Those two are...”

Once the dust clouds settled and they drew nearer, they could see the two figures much better.

“Huh? Isn’t that...?!” As soon as she got a clear view of their faces, Satsuki’s eyes widened.

“Why...?” Miharu, still on Ariel’s back, was also clearly shocked. The two people standing before the group were very familiar.

The boy in particular had known Miharu and Satsuki for a very long time.

“Masato?!” Latifa exclaimed.

Indeed, standing in the place where the pillar of light had appeared was Sendo Masato, the twelve-year-old boy who had separated from Miharu after the banquet, moving to the great nation of Centostella to the south of Galarc.

Beside him was the first princess of that nation, Lilianna Centostella. Masato and Lilianna appeared shaken, unsure of how to process the situation at hand. They were glancing around at their surroundings with uncertainty.

However, they soon spotted Miharu and the others approaching them. At first, Masato drew the sword in his hand, standing before Lilianna to protect her. But then...

“Miharu...and all of you...?!”

He quickly realized it was Miharu he was looking at. His caution immediately disappeared as he lowered his sword, staring at the familiar faces in shock.

The distance between the two groups closed quickly. Gouki stopped running in the lead when he was about ten meters away from them.

“Are you acquainted with them...?” he asked Satsuki, who was right behind him.

Satsuki explained their background to him. “Yes. He’s the younger brother of my underclassman from the world we came from. The person next to him is the princess of a neighboring kingdom.”

“H-Hey, Masato! Was there someone else here just now?” Latifa asked, unable to suppress her restless emotions as she looked around.

“Huh...? No, I didn’t see anyone,” Masato answered in confusion, sensing her unusual panic.

“I see...”

Latifa’s shoulders fell, although not entirely from disappointment. The others

in the group were similarly bothered by their surroundings.

“What’s wrong, everyone?” Masato seemed to sense something was wrong from their moods. He inquired after the reason for their expressions.



“There was a fight here just moments ago. One of a scale beyond imagination... Do you have any idea what happened, Masato?” Satsuki asked.

“No, we just appeared here out of the blue. You guys came running right away, so I have no idea what’s going on.”

“I see...” Everyone exchanged glances at Masato’s answer.

“Hey, Masato. Where’s Aki...and your brother?” Miharuru asked hesitantly, alighting from Ariel’s back.

Recalling what had happened between Takahisa and Miharuru, Masato’s reply came out somewhat awkwardly. “Oh... The two of them should be in the Centostella Castle.”

“We haven’t seen anyone else here since our arrival,” Lilianna said, adding to Masato’s answer. “May I ask a question as well?”

As a fellow royal, Charlotte responded. “Of course, please go ahead.”

“Where are we?” Lilianna’s question revealed how they were unaware of their current location.

“This is the Galarc Kingdom, on the outskirts of Duke Gregory’s territory. Sir Masato just said you appeared here out of the blue, does that mean you two didn’t come here of your own will?”

“Yes, we were both speaking in the Centostella Castle mere moments ago. Then we were standing here before I knew it.”

“I see.”

“Just to confirm, you weren’t the ones who summoned us here, right?”

“Yes. As Lady Satsuki just said, there was a fight happening here moments ago. We came over to investigate the aftermath, which was when you two were summoned.”

“I see. So there’s no way of knowing who summoned us here?”

The two princesses took the lead in confirming the facts, making full use of their wit.

Things would get complex if they started discussing who was at fault in the

current situation. Both sides needed to make it clear that this situation was just as unexpected for them as it was for the other.

“Indeed. However, there is one potential reason why the two of you were summoned here. I cannot say for sure if it’s the answer, but...” Charlotte alluded to the reason for their summoning.

Lilianna paused for a moment. “Could you please tell me?” she asked.

“Either Sir Masato or Princess Lilianna has become a hero,” Charlotte explained simply.

“Huh?!” Masato yelped in shock.

“Is that so...” In contrast, Lilianna’s reaction was closer to understanding than surprise. She seemed to have considered that possibility already, based on her own experience and knowledge.

“Wh-Wha... Wait, Princess Charlotte, was it? By hero, do you mean like Satsuki...?”

“Yes.”

“And either one of us is a hero?” Masato looked at Lilianna while questioning Charlotte skeptically.

“As I said earlier, I cannot say for sure whether that is the answer. The phenomenon that occurred before you were summoned was merely the same as what happened when Lady Satsuki was summoned to this world.”

Charlotte didn’t make any declarations, but her expression seemed rather certain.

“In that case...” Lilianna hummed in understanding, then looked at Masato’s face.

“I believe it is most likely that you are the hero, Sir Masato,” she said, looking between Charlotte and Masato.

“Huh...? Me?!” Masato pointed at himself in horror.

“Sir Masato comes from the same world as Lady Satsuki, after all,” Charlotte said, giving the basis of her suspicion why Masato was the hero.

It was the most natural conjecture to make. As someone who hailed from the world of the heroes, Masato made the most sense as a hero.

“That, and there’s that sword,” Lilianna said, pointing at the sword in Masato’s hand.

“R-Right...” Masato turned his attention to the sword.

“You didn’t have that sword in the castle,” Lilianna pointed out. “I wasn’t sure at first, but after hearing everyone’s accounts of the light pillar, it all seems to make sense. It’s clear from one glance that the sword is extremely well made... Perhaps that is your Divine Arms?”

“This is a Divine Arms? All I was thinking was how similar the situation was compared to the first time we came to this world...” Masato looked down at the sword in shock.

“How about we ask Lady Satsuki for her opinion as a hero?” Charlotte suggested, turning to Satsuki.

“Huh? Me? Umm... If it’s a Divine Arms, it’ll disappear when you think about it disappearing...”

Flustered by the sudden attention, Satsuki gave her answer in a confused manner. Then, the sword vanished.

“Hmm... Oh, it disappeared...”

Masato hummed as he focused on his thoughts.

“Looks like it’s decided,” Charlotte said with a somewhat troubled sigh. “I’d love to exchange more information in detail, but this is technically a battlefield. Would you like to accompany us to our base? My father is waiting there,” she continued, ignoring Masato’s bewildered look to gesture in the direction of the base by the lake.

“The king?” Lilianna’s eyes widened in surprise. If the king was personally present at the battlefield, there must have been a major war going on. But she hadn’t heard any rumors of such strife within the Galarc Kingdom. Her surprise and confusion were only natural.

“Yes. There was a minor—well, now that you two have been summoned here,

I suppose it should be called a rather major incident.”

Charlotte sighed gloomily, as though to sympathize with her confusion. She then looked at Lilianna and awaited her reply.

“Is that so...”

Masato watched the contemplative look on Lilianna’s face curiously. “Is something the matter, Princess Lilianna?”

Lilianna smiled, shaking her head to dismiss his concern. “No, I’m just a little baffled by the sudden turn of events. I understand. Please lead us to your base.”

“Thank you for your cooperation. Like Sir Masato and Lady Satsuki’s friendship, our kingdoms are also friendly nations. In the name of the Second Princess of Galarc, I promise we will welcome you as state guests,” Charlotte declared with a royal demeanor.

“Char can act like a proper princess when she wants to, huh...” Satsuki murmured in admiration, seeing no sign of Charlotte’s usual mischievous charms.

“Of course. And so, I would like to bring these two to the base—would you be willing to cooperate, Lady Orphia?” Charlotte grinned at Satsuki good-naturedly before turning to make a request of Orphia. She wanted Ariel to carry them back the way they had come.

“Of course I am,” Orphia said, nodding readily.

“Thus, I would like someone to stay here and continue investigating the area a bit more. With Sir Masato here, I’d like Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu to accompany me. Is that okay?”

Charlotte asked Miharu and Satsuki to come along, as the two came from the same world.

“Yeah, sure... Let’s go, Miharu.”

“Okay...” Miharu looked around the uninhabited wilderness as though something about the place was still bothering her. But she couldn’t leave Masato alone either, and hesitantly nodded.

“In that case, Kayoko and I will remain here to investigate further,” Gouki volunteered with a glance at Kayoko.

“I’m staying as well!” Latifa also offered herself as an investigator. Like Miharu, there was something about this place that bothered her, even though she didn’t know what. That was what her expression was saying.

“I will remain as well. Alma, go with Orphia and guard the others,” Sara ordered.

“Understood.”

Fox werebeasts and wolf werebeasts had far better noses than humans, so they were perfect investigators.

“I will remain too. I can use magic that detects essence.” Celia also offered herself as an investigator. She was just as curious as the others as to what had happened. Her expression said as much.

Thus, the members of the investigation team were decided. The only ones remaining were the master and servant combination, Liselotte and Aria.

“What will you do, Liselotte?” Charlotte asked.

“Right, I...” Caught off guard by suddenly being addressed, Liselotte’s answer came out rather vague. Like the others, she had been driven here by the sense of unease. She had hoped to find an answer to that feeling here, but those hopes had been dashed. She was still interested in the surroundings, but...

“I will return to the base as well...”

She must have realized she wouldn’t be of much use remaining here. Instead of sticking around without a reason, Liselotte chose to accompany them back.

“Hey, Miharu, Satsuki,” Masato whispered, having gone up to Miharu and Satsuki. Lilianna stepped back tactfully so that she wouldn’t overhear them.

“Hmm? Something the matter, Masato?”

Miharu had still been looking around the area, seemingly reluctant to leave, but she replied to Masato with a smile. Satsuki noticed her behavior and frowned slightly.

“No, I was just wondering why Sara and the others are out and about in front of others. Even Ariel’s out and about,” Masato explained.

“Oh, a lot has happened since you left. We’ll explain it to you later,” Satsuki said, wiping away the shadow that was in her expression earlier.

“Hmm, I see. Huh? Come to think of it...”

Sensing there were certain circumstances to the situation, Masato chose not to question it any further. But at the same time, he seemed to remember something.

“Come to think of what?” Miharuru asked, encouraging him to continue.

“Umm... Huh? What was I going to say?”

Masato twisted his neck.

Satsuki exchanged a look with Miharuru and chuckled. “How would we know?”

“Right... That’s weird. I was about to recall something, but then it slipped my mind...”

Masato hummed, twisting his neck further. But in the end, he couldn’t remember what he was about to say.

“I’d like to depart soon. Would that be all right with you, Lady Satsuki?” Charlotte asked.

“Oh, right. Sorry, we’ll be right there!”

“Sir Masato, Lady Lilianna, and Lady Miharuru... Please climb on Ariel’s back.”

“Got it. Let’s go.”

Satsuki walked in the lead, with Masato, Miharuru, and Lilianna following her.

“Yo! It’s been a while, Ariel! Please take care of me.”

Masato approached Ariel giddily, patting its head. In response, Ariel rubbed its face against Masato’s cheerfully.

“Is this bird Ariel? It’s rather large...” Lilianna inched forward timidly, looking up at its giant body.

“It won’t hurt you, so don’t be afraid. Hup! Okay, give me your hand.” Masato

climbed onto Ariel's back, then offered his hand to Lilianna. Ariel was stooped forward and had materialized with a saddle for easy riding, but it was still a very gentlemanly gesture.

"Thank you very much, Sir Masato."

With Masato's support, Lilianna stepped up on the footholds of the saddle, then climbed onto Ariel's back.

"Heh..." Satsuki hummed in approval.

"Wh-What are you staring at, Satsuki?"

"You've become quite the gentleman, Masato."

"Hah? Wh-What are you talking about?"

"The way you're escorting Princess Lilianna so naturally. You've grown a lot in such a short time. Isn't that right, Miharuru?"

Miharuru agreed with a smile. "Hee hee. That's right."

"Sir Masato is very kind to me," Lilianna added pleasantly.

"Jeez..."

Surrounded by older girls who were completely in sync with each other, Masato found himself outmatched and turned away in embarrassment.

"Did he have a good role model over there? Perhaps he took after a certain someone. Right, Miharuru?" Satsuki asked, grinning smugly. But as soon as she turned to Miharuru, a strange look came over her face.

Miharuru looked at her curiously. "Is something wrong, Satsuki?"

"I don't know if it's the same as Masato, but I also found myself unable to say what I wanted to say. I wonder... What was it?"

The words on the tip of her tongue had vanished without a trace, leaving her with a restless feeling. But she was unable to recall what she wanted to say, and headed back to the lake with the rest of the returning group in that state.



Meanwhile, in the skies far above, Rio and Aishia were watching what was

happening on the ground.

Like the group on the ground, Rio was of the assumption that Masato was the new hero. He had seen the summoning of a hero with his own eyes before.

If the phenomenon of a hero summoning had occurred the moment after Erica was killed, then it was only natural to assume Masato had become the new hero. Since Rio actually remembered Erica, he was even more certain of this than those on the ground.

Aishia, Rio called to Aishia in her spirit form.

Yes? came the immediate reply.

Did that monster go into Masato?

...Yeah.

The second reply was delayed. This confirmed that Masato was the new hero.

I see...

Aishia's downhearted feelings were conveyed to Rio, making him equally conflicted.

"..."

Rio felt the urge to descend to the ground, but he held back the impulse with his will of steel. He wanted to decide what to do after hearing what Aishia had to say.

I'd like to watch over everyone a little longer. I'm going to head back to the base with the returning group. Can you watch over the ones staying here?

Got it.

Then I'll see you later.

On the ground, Ariel was just taking off for the lake. Once he confirmed Aishia's reply, Rio started flying after Ariel from above.



After Miharuru and the others left for the base, Gouki and Kayoko used footholds of magic essence to search the skies while Celia, Latifa, and Sara

investigated the ground through Zona Revelare and the sense of smell of a werebeast.

They conducted the investigation from various angles, checking for any traces of people, magic, or scents using their respective specialties.

“Anything?” Celia asked the two with keen noses.

“I can smell blood. There’s the scent of a man and a woman...”

Sara described the scents she detected, but she looked rather troubled while doing so.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s just this scent...”

“Is it a scent you know?”

“It’s the scent of the same soap that we use.”

“Isn’t that because we’re here?”

“No, there’s a body odor mixed with the soap.”

“You can tell that as well? Wow...” Celia mumbled in awe. Of course, she knew that these two had sharp senses of smell, but she rarely saw them use their senses in this way in their daily lives.

“That’s because the scent is fresh. Whoever it was didn’t leave too long ago.”

“I see... But the soap we’re using is...”

“Yes, it’s our own homemade soap. We were taught how to make the soap by someone else, but there shouldn’t be many others who know...”

“Celia, Sara! Over here!”

Just then, Latifa, who had been sniffing around intently, stopped at a certain place and called the two over. It was the spot where Rio had pierced Erica’s heart.

“There’s a bloodstain here.”

“It hasn’t been that long since the fight, then.”

Celia and Sara approached Latifa, examining the bloodstained ground.

“It’s the blood of whoever was fighting...right?” Latifa asked nervously.

“Most likely. I can smell someone else here too.”

Sara’s nose twitched. Latifa did the same, attempting to smell the traces of whoever had been here. Celia also sniffed the air curiously, but she couldn’t detect anything and ended up tilting her head in confusion.

This scent...

Why did it make her feel like this? Latifa looked like she was about to cry. It was her first time smelling this scent, yet there was something extremely familiar about it. She didn’t know why, but tears welled up in her eyes.

“I-I’m going to look around a bit more!”

Unable to stand still any longer, Latifa ran off to track down the scent.

Although werebeasts had exceptional noses, the most Latifa and Sara could smell were scents left behind in the immediate vicinity. They couldn’t detect distant senses unless the wind carried them directly to their noses.

However, as long as the scent continued, they could track them down forever. Latifa no longer had any memories of the moment, but that was how she once tracked Rio down from Beltrant to Amande to assassinate him. That’s why she circled the area of the bloodstain to sniff out the scent.

“Zona Revelare.”

Perhaps there was something that could provide a hint about the traces. Celia cast her spell and searched for any reactions to magic essence in the area. A geometric pattern appeared around her, lighting up a magic circle of around one hundred meters in radius.

No reaction, huh...

Celia sighed, straining her eyes to visualize the essence in her surroundings. While she normally wouldn’t need to use magic to visually detect essence, the pillar of light that appeared earlier had disrupted the ode and mana in the area.

When the essence is this chaotic, I can’t trust what I see.

Celia sighed again, this time heavier.

If she were to describe her current state, it was as though there were a thick fog before her eyes. She could see into the physical distance perfectly fine, but as soon as she tried to visualize the magic essence, it was as if her view was obstructed by glowing particles of essence. Spells that could search the area for essence reactions above a certain magic level were extremely useful in such conditions.

Sara came up to Celia after her lap around the area. “How did you go, Celia?”

“It’s no good. I’ll try expanding my search range next. What about you?”

“Same here. The scent cuts off abruptly.”

“No clues, huh?”

“There was the spirit presence that suddenly appeared before we got here, but it seems like they returned to their spirit form.”

Celia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Huh... Spirits are rare in the Strahl region, right?”

“I’m pretty sure they exist, they just rarely leave their spirit form and materialize.”

“I see.”

Spirit generally stayed in their spirit forms. This was because they didn’t have the magic essence to maintain a material form without a contract. Besides, spirits were extremely cautious beings. They didn’t appear before humans without a reason, and they didn’t form contracts with people they didn’t trust.

“But even then...”

“Even then...?”

“It was a rather powerful spirit. It’s definitely rare in that sense.”

“A powerful spirit... Like Lady Dryas?”

The highest-ranked spirit Celia knew of was Dryas.

“Indeed. I believe it may have been a humanoid spirit.”

“Wow...”

For a brief moment, Celia looked in the distance and gave an inarticulate reply. Was it just her imagination? The back view of a peach-haired girl had flashed through her mind for a brief moment, but that memory had now vanished without a trace.

“What’s wrong?” Sara asked, tilting her head in question.

“Nothing... It’s just...”

Celia was on the verge of remembering something when Latifa came running over. “Celia!”

“Did you find a clue?” Celia responded, pulling herself together.

“No, the scent really just disappears suddenly.”

Latifa’s ears drooped as she described how the scent didn’t lead anywhere.

“That’s too bad...”

“It’s possible that whoever it was left through the skies. Which would make them much more difficult to track...”

They could track someone who was moving along the ground, but they had no way of doing that in the air.

“What if they were affected by the summoning and sent somewhere else as a result?” Latifa suggested.

“If so, whoever disappeared would be in Centostella Kingdom right now?” Celia wondered, looking at Sara. The spirit folk had far more experience in successfully using teleportation sorcery.

“As far as I know, teleportation sorcery is a one-way passage, so it shouldn’t cause anyone to swap places with anyone else...”

The spell that had moved Masato and Lilianna here was still unknown to them, so Sara couldn’t give a definite answer.

“Let’s expand our investigation range a little more.”

“Good idea. Celia, I’d like you to come with me. Latifa, make sure you don’t wander too far away when searching.”

“Okay!”

Latifa ran off as Sara and Celia continued their investigation together. Thus, the search resumed across an even wider area.



A dozen or so meters above the three girls on the ground, Gouki and Kayoko were running around in the air. They were investigating the area while watching for any suspicious figures on the ground.

Several minutes had passed since they commenced the search. Their results were the same as the group on the ground. There was no one other than Celia, Sara, and Latifa around, and once they had confirmed that—

“Don’t you find it strange, Kayoko?”

Gouki approached Kayoko and started running beside her.

“There are many strange things going on right now. Which are you referring to?”

“Why did we leave the Karasuki Kingdom? How did we find out that the late Lady Ayame and Zen had migrated to this land?”

There was a fundamental problem with this situation.

Gouki and Kayoko had always regretted how they couldn’t devote themselves to Ayame until the very end. That was why they left behind everything in Karasuki and departed for the far land of Strahl. That part still made sense.

However, Gouki couldn’t imagine himself leaving behind his home country for some uncertain information. As a senior warrior, King Homura had bestowed him with a vital position in the kingdom. There was no way he would have discarded such a post for a superficial motive.

And yet, he couldn’t recall the trigger that had prompted them to leave the Karasuki Kingdom. Because of that...

“Why are you asking that at this late stage? That’s what I’d like to say, but I feel the same way. I cannot remember myself. Why did we think of leaving the kingdom?”

Gouki and Kayoko were both experiencing an indescribable feeling of discomfort.

“Although our circumstances were kept secret, King Homura gave us his blessing to leave the kingdom. I’m sure we departed with an unshakeable resolution...”

Gouki was sure of that—he certainly didn’t feel any regret about being here right now. He could proudly say that he was standing here because he wanted to.

“Hmm... Yes, that must be it.”

Gouki answered his own question, confirming his beliefs.

“You seem to have convinced yourself of something, yet your expression isn’t clear.”

As expected of his wife. Kayoko saw through the subtleties in Gouki’s expression.

“I am here because I wanted it myself. That I am sure of. The same applies to you, no?”

Gouki implicitly asked his wife if she wanted to return to Karasuki.

“Of course,” Kayoko responded immediately.

“There’s something we must accomplish in this land. For the sake of the late Lady Ayame.”

“Indeed.”

“That is why I’m troubled. I cannot remember what we have to accomplish, or why we came here in the first place.”

That was the reason for his unsettled expression.

“I have no proof of this, but...”

“What is it?”

“I have a feeling that what we’ve forgotten was in this place not long ago.” Kayoko voiced her thoughts out loud fluently.

“Indeed... I think so too.”

That was why they had volunteered to investigate the area. They couldn’t

help but wonder what had happened here, and who had been fighting here.

But contrary to those feelings, there was no one to be seen in the area apart from Latifa and the others. There were no traces of anything that could provide a hint either.

“There’s nothing here... Let’s go down and join up with Lady Latifa and the others.”

Gouki had been looking down at the ground while talking to Kayoko, but he decided to call off their search in the skies at this point.

“Hmm...?”

Something seemed strange to him.

“Is something the matter?” Kayoko asked, a similar expression on her face.

“No, it’s just that I mentioned Lady Latifa just now.”

“That you did.”

“Latifa... Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Miharu, Satsuki, Princess Charlotte... Latifa... Hmm. Latifa. Suzune.”

Gouki tried saying everyone’s names.

“Hmm...”

Why was Latifa the only one he felt particularly protective over when speaking her name? Gouki looked down at the group on the ground, frustrated that he didn’t know the answer.

“It seems we need to have a discussion with everyone.”

The others had to be experiencing the same sense of discomfort.

“Indeed.” Gouki nodded, then headed down to the ground with Kayoko.



Miharu’s group had returned to the Galarc Kingdom’s military base by the lake.

“Father.”

Walking in the lead, Charlotte called out to Francois, who was just giving

commands to the army.

“Oh? That was fast.”

“Yes. We left the investigation to Gouki and the others and returned first. We ran into some unexpected guests, you see,” Charlotte said, looking at Masato and Lilianna behind her.

Lilianna greeted Francois with a curtsy. “Long time no see, King Francois.”

“Princess Lilianna and Lord Masato?”

Even Francois hadn’t been expecting that, and his eyes widened. He barely had any acquaintance with Masato, but it seemed he remembered him clearly.

“You witnessed that pillar of light just now, no? That light was what summoned these two here.”

“I see...”

Guessing the circumstances from that explanation just now, Francois paused for a second before glancing at Masato.

“Princess Lilianna was hoping to speak to you. She’ll require some assistance getting back to her home kingdom.”

“I understand. I will make some time for that immediately,” Francois agreed. The fact he didn’t postpone the talk showed how high of a priority he believed it was.

“Are you sure? You can settle the business you have at hand first,” Lilianna replied, looking around the base. The base was currently in a rather flurried state. Soldiers were clearly running about busily.

“I’ve finished giving all the commands required. Even if I needed to give further orders, I must first find out what happened at the pillar of light. I may not be able to spare much time, but if that is all right with you...”

“In that case, I would be most grateful for whatever time you can spare.”

“Princess Lilianna and Charlotte will come with me, then. Lady Satsuki, may I entrust Lord Masato to you?”

“Yes, of course,” Satsuki replied with a nod.



Several minutes later, Francois, Charlotte, and Lilianna had moved to the tent set up for the king in the lake base. Francois and Lilianna sat down facing each other, while Charlotte remained standing behind Francois.

“First, let’s start with the most pressing matters. I will arrange a means of contact with the Centostella Kingdom immediately,” Francois began.

“Thank you very much,” Lilianna said.

“As allied nations, it’s only natural.”

They had yet to get to the true business at hand. Francois looked back at Charlotte standing behind him, ordering her to give her report.

Charlotte spoke fluently. “I shall explain what happened from the beginning. We were on our way to the location of the earlier battle when a pillar of light appeared. There, we found Princess Lilianna and Sir Masato. They described how they had been in the Centostella Castle mere moments ago, so the assumption is that they were teleported here. Judging from the situation...”

She paused, preparing to wrap up her report. “It seems that Sir Masato has been summoned as a hero. He is currently in possession of a sword like the Divine Arms.”

“What is your opinion of these events, Princess Lilianna?”

“As Princess Charlotte just said, Sir Masato and I were in the Centostella Castle just before arriving here. We didn’t witness the pillar of light ourselves, but Sir Masato indeed had a sword resembling the Divine Arms. I agree that it seems like he has become a hero.”

“I see.”

Once both sides gave their accounts, Lilianna and Francois both sighed heavily.

“If a new hero has truly been summoned, then a sacred stone must have been involved. If there was a sacred stone that summoned a hero within the Galarc Kingdom, then the kingdom claims possession of that sacred stone,” Francois said frankly. The fact Masato had been summoned as a hero on Galarc land was

a rather delicate issue.

“However, I have no intention of restraining Lord Masato against his will. I’d prefer to reach a compromise we can all agree with,” he added somberly. Taking in Masato would be the move to make if Francois were to prioritize the interests of the kingdom, but he knew that doing so would ruin the kingdom’s relationship with Satsuki.

“I feel the same way. However, in regard to that compromise, I’m afraid I cannot be the one to provide an official answer.”

Lilianna was the First Princess of the Centostella Kingdom, but she was only a princess. She wasn’t the king. She was unable to make international negotiations without the king’s direct permission. She knew that the current situation was beyond her power.

“Of course, I understand that. That is why I will contact the Centostella Kingdom with haste. You should discuss things with your father.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

Lilianna had just been summoned to a foreign kingdom with nothing more than the clothes on her back. It was impossible for her and Masato to return to Centostella just by themselves. Realistically speaking, they had no choice but to seek the Galarc Kingdom’s assistance.

“I also wish to hear Lord Masato’s opinion before making a decision.”

The situation was hectic, but it wouldn’t be too late to decide things after Masato saw the dream that the heroes were meant to see. Although such details weren’t mentioned out loud...

“However, there’s one condition I would like to request of this situation. In exchange for our cooperation in arranging contact with your kingdom, I would like to ask that you and Lord Masato remain in our kingdom for the near future in order to hold the negotiations on equal footing,” Francois said, explaining what he sought in recompense. His goal was to stop Lilianna from taking Masato straight home after contacting the Centostella Kingdom—if that happened, the Galarc Kingdom would lose any claim they had over Masato, aggravating the relationship between the two kingdoms.

“Of course, if Lord Masato insists on returning to Centostella no matter what, we won’t stop you. Thus, you may discuss with Lord Masato regarding when you wish to return to your kingdom. I will also explain the details of this meeting to Lady Satsuki.”

The discussions would only proceed with respect for Masato’s wishes. That was why this was a gentleman’s agreement. It was basically an offer to help resolve their problem out of sincerity, hoping they would show the same sincerity back by facing them in negotiations. Someone of Lilianna’s position could easily convince Masato to return at once and feign ignorance afterwards, so it was a risky gamble.

With Satsuki and Masato to be looped in on this conversation, neither Galarc nor Centostella could act deviously towards each other in the future, as the wrong move could potentially turn the two heroes against the kingdoms. Francois’s proposal was extremely wise in this regard, as it took both of their personalities into consideration.

“I understand. I will discuss things with Sir Masato and make arrangements with my father to remain in this country for the present.”

It seemed that Lilianna didn’t want to leave a bad impression on Masato either. She readily accepted Francois’s suggestion.

“Thank you for cooperating. In that case—Charlotte?”

“Yes, Father.”

“I will leave the explanation to Lady Satsuki to you. You can speak to her and Lord Masato together with Princess Lilianna. I’m also placing you in charge of contacting the Centostella Kingdom once we return to the capital.”

“As you wish,” Charlotte replied, bowing her head respectfully.

It sounds like Masato will be okay here for the time being, Rio thought to himself, having heard the entire conversation. He had sneaked into the base after Miharuru and was eavesdropping from the back of the tent. He trusted Francois and Charlotte, but he had wanted to see for himself how Masato would be treated as a new hero.

I’d also like to check on the others, but...

Rio directed his attention outside the tent. With superior spirit arts users like Orphia and Alma around, not even he could approach them easily. They would be able to detect the barrier he was using to remain invisible.

If he was being honest to himself, he wanted to hear what they were saying, but...

I guess it'd be better to avoid them, huh?

He recalled Aishia's words from before and suppressed that urge.

Please look after Masato and the others, Rio thought, bowing quietly at Francois and Charlotte. He then exited the tent and departed from the base.

Chapter 2: Mystery of the Transcendent Ones

After Rio regrouped with Aishia in her spirit form, they set up the stone house on an uninhabited hill overlooking the lake base and Greille.

“It’s all right now,” Rio said.

Okay.

With that, Aishia materialized. Multiple barriers were set up around the stone house, preventing Aishia from being detected by other spirits as long as she was inside. There was no way for the contract spirits of the spirit folk girls to find her.

“Shall we sit down?”

There was no one in the spacious living room besides Rio and Aishia. Rio hung his coat on the coat rack and looked around the vacant space before sitting down on the sofa.

“Yeah...” Aishia mumbled, sitting opposite Rio. The worried look on her face probably wasn’t his imagination.

“If it’s hard to talk about, you can take all the time you need to get ready.”

Rio wasn’t about to force her to speak. He gently expressed his willingness to wait until she was ready to talk.

But Aishia shook her head. “It’s about you, so...I will explain what’s going on right now,” she said, staring into Rio’s eyes. “Your eyes.”

“Huh?”

“Your eyes have changed color.”

“My eyes...changed color?”

Rio touched the right side of his brow, covering his vision with a puzzled look. There was no way of seeing his own eye color without a mirror, but nothing felt particularly odd about his eyes.

“They’re red now. I’m sorry.” Aishia hung her head guiltily. As she had said, Rio’s hazel eyes were now tinged red.

“They don’t feel any different. I can see through them fine. I don’t have any problem with my eyes changing color, and I don’t see how it’s your fault...”

Rio laughed to ease Aishia’s concerns, dismissing the matter lightly. But Aishia’s expression remained gloomy as she continued speaking. “The reason they’ve changed is because you’ve assimilated with me, I think.”

“Assimilated...?”

“In the fight just now, you used the power of a transcendent one. That power is normally unavailable to humans. Attempting to use it with a human body would result in death. That’s why I became part of your being while you were using it. You could say we were fused. That is assimilation.”

“We’re two different people right now, but we were sharing one single body earlier...is what you’re saying?” Rio asked, unsure of exactly what she meant.

“Yeah. Using transcendent powers in a human body would have killed you. In order to avoid that, I altered your body. By assimilating with me, your body became one with mine, making you closer to a spirit than a human.”

“I see... I didn’t know you could do something like that.”

“It’s called a spirit bond, and it’s a secret art that creates a stronger bond to a spirit than a contract. I used it with you to enhance the connection between us, then assimilated our bodies.”

“A secret art... No one in the spirit folk village could do such a thing, right?”

“I don’t think they even know about it. The Seven Wise Gods created the spirit bond. It’s a special technique only a scarce few people could do one thousand years ago.”

“Spirit contracts and spirit bonds. What’s the exact difference between them?”

“At the surface level, a spirit contract is an agreement between the two parties, whereas spirit bonds use a special sorcery to create a sturdier tie. Both are a form of connecting the souls, but the actual difference lies in the strength

and depth of that connection. A spirit can only assimilate with the body of a human through the stronger soul connection of a spirit bond.”

“So I can think of the main difference between spirit contracts and spirit bonds as the ability to assimilate or not?”

“Yup. Assimilating gives the bond partner several benefits. One of them is the Spirit Arms—a materialization of the bond partner’s soul as a weapon.”

At Aishia’s explanation, an image flashed through Rio’s mind. “That sword from back then...”

He thought about the sword that had appeared in the earlier fight. He had created a sword out of thin air, much like the Divine Arms of the heroes.

“That’s right. That sword is different from those created by the powers of the transcendent ones. It’s your Spirit Arms, and it materialized as a result of assimilation. You can think of it as how a spirit incarnates by materializing its own body. You can only materialize that sword when assimilated with me.”

“Right... I don’t think I could make that sword appear right now, even if I wanted to. But I feel like I could use the transcendent powers if I tried,” Rio said, staring at his dominant hand. He had applied his powers to the sword that had materialized earlier, but the sword hadn’t been a necessary factor to activate the powers. This was something he knew intuitively, not logically.

“You must not use your transcendent powers carelessly. Make sure you’re assimilated with me when you do,” Aishia warned, her tone oddly firm for her.

What would happen if he used it without Aishia? She had said as much earlier.

“If I use the powers without being assimilated, I’ll die, right? Okay, I got it.”

The cost of gaining and using a power beyond the realm of mankind was heavy. The moment one activated their power beyond what a human body could endure, they would die. Rio swallowed the meaning of that and nodded seriously.

“Assimilation has other benefits besides the Spirit Arms. Like I said before, assimilation turns the bond partner’s body into something resembling a spirit. An increased degree of assimilation will raise the bond partner’s strength and

resilience, making it harder for them to die. That is how you survived using the transcendent power.”

“Does that mean the stronger the degree of assimilation, the less human I’ll be?”

“Yes,” Aishia confirmed.

“So there are stages to the assimilation too.”

“Yup. If you want to express it in numbers, it’d range from one to a hundred percent, and beyond.”

“So how much was that earlier battle in numbers?”

“I believe it was extremely close to one hundred percent. That was my intention when assimilating, at least. Perhaps that’s why your eye color changed after I released the assimilation.”

Aishia looked conflicted.

“Like I said earlier, a different eye color is nothing to worry about. In fact, it sounds like there are only benefits to assimilation.”

The significant increase of the number of basic abilities and improved vitality both sounded like good things for the spirit bond partner.

“There are negatives to this as well.”

However, it seemed it wasn’t all good things.

In other words...

“When you’re assimilated, you’re no longer a human. But at the same time, you’re not a spirit. Your being becomes extremely unnatural, but stable. Like you said, the greater the degree of assimilation, the less human you’ll be. That’s why there’s no knowing what kind of effect assimilation will have on you... This is the main demerit. Your eye color has changed, and your body had to bear a huge burden when the assimilation ended. Although that burden probably came from the recoil of using the transcendent powers...”

It could also have come from the intensified assimilation. After saying that, Aishia stared at Rio. Then...

“There may be other changes that went unnoticed. There’s no telling whether those changes will be good or bad, or permanent or temporary,” she added.

It could be compared to taking a drug with dramatic effects, but unknown side effects. There was a chance of nothing bad happening, but at worst, one’s life could be in danger. That was the kind of uncertainty involved.

After a worried pause, Aishia added, “If a strong assimilation is repeated numerous times, you may lose the ability to return to being a human...”

Rio’s eyes widened faintly as he listened to those words. However, he didn’t seem to want Aishia to feel responsible.

“Well, it is what it is,” he replied cheerfully, showing no signs of pessimism. “More importantly, does it have any negative effects on you, Aishia? If it does, we should stop using it altogether.”

On top of that, he expressed worry for Aishia instead.

“No matter how great the assimilation is, there should be little risk to me.”

“Really?” Although Rio didn’t doubt her words, he pressed on to make sure.

“As a spirit, my true form is my spirit form, and my material body is created freely by myself. But for you, your material form is your true form. Humans don’t have spirit forms, yet assimilation makes you extremely similar to a spirit. Your situation is clearly more precarious than mine.”

Thus, the risks were greater for Rio, was what she was saying. A human could only exist with a physical body, yet assimilation caused that human to have a spirit-like body instead. When the assimilation was released, the human had to return to their physical body. It was inevitable for them to have to bear a greater burden than spirits, who were born with the ability to switch forms.

“I see... All right.”

“The problem is with Satsuki and the others. Spirit bonding is a technique that the heroes can use as well.”

It was at this moment that Aishia brought up the heroes. However, it wasn’t out of the blue. The reason was clear from her explanation until now.

“The heroes are assimilated with upper high rank spirits?” Rio guessed.

Assimilation with upper high rank spirits would explain everything—from the way they'd suddenly gained supernatural powers, to how they could freely materialize the Divine Arms. Sure enough...

“Yes, there are upper high ranked spirits sealed within the summoned heroes. The one that possessed Saint Erica was the upper high spirit of earth.”

“It all makes sense now...”

The mystery of the heroes had finally been solved.

“But I believe the details of their spirit bonds are very different from ours. The spirit bond between the heroes and upper high rank spirits is an enslaving bond.”

“Enslaving...?” Rio doubted his ears.

“The spirit bond between us uses the original form of the sorcery, whereas the bond with the heroes uses a spell formula that has been altered by the Six Wise Gods. The spell is refined to add multiple conditions to the bond, allowing the upper high rank spirits to place the heroes in an extremely unfavorable position. The Wise Gods set up the hero summonings to work in such a way.”

Aishia explained the relationship between heroes, upper high rank spirits, and the Wise Gods. Then...

“That’s why they hate me. And Miharu too...” she admitted sheepishly.

“They hate you and Miharu... Is that because...”

“Miharu was one of the Wise Gods in her past life—the seventh one who was exiled. Her name was Lina.”

“...” Having gotten his biggest shock of the day, Rio fell speechless. It wasn’t that he doubted Aishia’s words—it was just so astounding.

“And in a way, I was the Wise God Lina as well...” Aishia continued. It was a confession that made it sound like she and Miharu were the same person.

Rio was even more shocked. “Huh...?”

“Roughly one thousand years ago, at the end of the Divine War, the Wise God Lina sacrificed some of her divinity to create me. She then made a spirit bond

between the Dragon King and me, and stored me in his soul.”



They had finally touched upon the main issue at hand, but it had taken a very complicated explanation to get there.

“It’s been one surprise after another today.” Rio sighed heavily, leaning back in his seat. He slowly looked up at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not something you need to apologize for... But I’d like a little time to organize my thoughts. Can we continue after dinner?”

Quite a lot of information had been gained from their conversation already. He wanted time to think things over before hearing the rest.

“Sure.”

“I’ll go take a bath first, then.” Rio was still battered from the earlier fight. There were still bloodstains on him as well, so he wanted to wash up quickly.

“Okay.”

“What will you do, Aishia?”

“You want me to join you?” Aishia asked, tilting her head curiously.

Flustered, Rio blushed. But Aishia was her usual self, smiling faintly. He quickly explained himself with an embarrassed laugh. “N-No, that’s not what I meant... If you want to go first, go ahead.”

“I can clean myself by returning to my spirit body. You should wash up first.”

“Right. Then I’ll do just that.”

Rio stood up from the sofa and grabbed his coat from the coat rack before heading to the bathroom.



Thus, Rio had moved to the bathroom. But before he entered the bath, he observed his beloved black wyvern coat that he had worn for a long time.

It’s pretty tattered...

As far as Rio knew, this coat had the highest defensive capabilities of any armor. But the earlier battle with the upper high rank spirit possessing Erica had

caused him to take multiple consecutive attacks, tearing the coat. The leather was melted where the magic attacks had hit him directly, and it seemed impossible to continue use as a long coat.

It's a shame, but maybe the parts that are still intact can be reused.

The area of cover would be reduced, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Black wyvern leather was difficult to handle—only master artisans like Dominic could process the material properly. But even Rio was capable of some simple patchwork. He could reduce the coat's length, or turn it into a scarf.

I feel bad for Dominic and the other dwarves' handiwork...

It wasn't just the black wyvern coat that had been carefully created by Dominic and the dwarves. The sword that had snapped under the force of the fight with the upper high rank spirit had been dwarf-made as well. He had left the destroyed sword at the lake base, so retrieval would be difficult. With a sigh, Rio placed the coat in his hands on a shelf in the changing room.

Then, he looked at the mirror, remembering that his eyes had changed color. Red pupils blinked back at him. He tried closing each eye to test his vision, but nothing else had changed about them. If anything, he seemed to have better vision than before.

At any rate, Rio decided to remove the magic artifact that changed his hair color.

"..."

He froze in surprise: the color didn't return to his natural black. In fact, his gray hair turned an even lighter shade.

Is this another side effect of assimilation...?

He couldn't say for sure, but that seemed to be the most probable conclusion. He grabbed a lock of his hair and examined it. There was no visible damage done to it, and it didn't fall out with a light tug either. He then picked out a single strand of hair and plucked it.

The color is...

He held the strand right up to his face and stared at it carefully. The color of the strand faded from white to black before his eyes.

It's back to normal.

Just what was happening to his body? He had nothing but questions about the situation, but there was no use pondering about it right now. Rio stared into the mirror for a few more seconds, then took off his shirt.

My old scars are gone too.

He froze at the realization. The fine scars that had been on his body since his time in the slums were completely gone. This was probably—unmistakably—another effect of assimilation with Aishia.

There's no use in acting shocked over every little thing, I guess.

Rio accepted it for what it was and finished changing, then headed into the bathroom.



At the same time, in a tent within the lakeside base of the Galarc Army...

“Thus concludes the explanation from our side.”

Charlotte had just finished telling Miharuru, Satsuki, and Masato about their plans for the future. Of course, Lilianna was present beside Masato.

After hearing Charlotte's explanation, Satsuki looked rather troubled. “You're being rather open about this,” she said.

“Princess Lilianna and I discussed it in advance and decided this would be the sincerest way of going about things.”

“Well, I suppose that's true...”

“I should also add that we are not seeking a particular response from you. As I have already said, our kingdom has no intention of forcing Sir Masato to remain. We only wish to express our claim over the sacred stone that was used to summon you here, as it is a national matter.”

“Erm... Does that mean I can choose where I want to be?” Masato asked hesitantly.

“Yes. If you choose to stay in Galarc, we will welcome you warmly and provide you with the same conditions as Lady Satsuki. We’ll need to make some careful adjustments if you wish to go to the Centostella Kingdom, so please join me in discussing things if that happens, Princess Lilianna,” Charlotte said, glancing at Lilianna.

“Right... Sure,” Masato nodded with uncertainty. From the explanation of the situation and Lilianna’s participation in the discussions, he probably surmised that there were no ulterior motives at play. Or perhaps he hadn’t fully realized he had become a hero.

“At the end of the day, a kingdom is a society. There are many nobles who will not agree with the notion of handing over an asset to another kingdom for free. The bottom line is that it’s a matter of politics, and I’m very sorry you’ve been dragged into it.” Charlotte bowed her head at Masato.

“N-No, it’s fine.” Masato shook his head meekly; whether it was because the other party was a princess he barely knew, or because Charlotte was a pretty girl close to his age, remained to be seen.

“I’m glad to hear you say that.” Charlotte smiled charmingly. When she met Masato’s eyes, Masato looked away and blushed.

“I see Masato’s still weak to cute girls,” Satsuki whispered in Miharuru’s ear.

Miharuru let out a dry laugh. “Aha ha...”

“I’m very sorry to leave you in a war zone, but please relax here with Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharuru in the meantime. I will arrange our return to the capital as soon as possible,” Charlotte said, wrapping up the conversation.

“Is the fight still ongoing outside...?” Satsuki asked.

“I cannot give a definite answer, but the Aerial Knights have reported that the armed group outside the city have retreated. A squad was sent to Greille a short while ago to investigate. We won’t know whether the fight is over until they return with their report. At the earliest, we’ll leave for the capital ahead of everyone within the next day or two.”

“I see...”

“Hey, Miharuru...”

“Yes, Masato?”

“What exactly happened here?” Masato asked Miharuru, who was sitting beside him.

“Actually... I don’t really remember.”

Masato looked puzzled. “You don’t remember...? How come?”

“I wonder why... I know that a foreign nation invaded the city here, so we came to recapture it. And then you were summoned... But I can’t remember what happened before that, and I have the feeling it was something important...” Miharuru frowned unhappily.

“As Lady Miharuru said, we are currently experiencing a mysterious situation. For some reason, no one is able to recall what happened in this land prior to a certain point,” Charlotte added, seeing the odd sense of loss in Miharuru’s frown.

“It seems like everyone’s memory of what happened before Masato appeared is missing. We were standing before an incredible scene before we knew it...” Satsuki clutched her head in vexation.

“Once Lady Celia and the others return, we should compare everyone’s memories to check what’s missing,” Charlotte said, sighing.

“Right...” Miharuru nodded, suppressing her frustration.

It’s impossible for you to remember anything right now.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, she seemed to hear a distant voice.

“Huh...?” Miharuru gasped, glancing around the room restlessly.

“What’s wrong, Miharuru?” Satsuki asked, bewildered by her sudden behavior.

“D-Did someone say something just now?”

“No... Unless you mean Char? She suggested we compare everyone’s memories once the others return. You nodded, right?”

Satsuki stared at Miharuru’s confused face.

“I-I see.”

A wave of confusion filled the dazed Miharuru as she doubted her ears.

“Are you okay...?”

“Yes. Sorry for being distracted. I must have misheard things.”

At Satsuki’s kind concern, Miharuru put on a fake smile to reassure her.
However...

Did I really mishear something...?

The earlier voice left a strange, lingering echo within Miharuru for some time after.



That night, in the dining room of the stone house...

“I’m done eating.”

“Me too. Thank you for the meal.”

Rio and Aishia finished eating dinner and sat down facing each other in the living room. After a sip of the freshly poured tea to calm himself, Rio spoke up.

“Okay, shall we continue the conversation from earlier?” he suggested.

“Sure.”

“I thought a lot about what you said. But before I listen to the rest, there’s something I wish to inform you about, and something I wish to ask. Do you mind?”

“Go ahead.”

“Then first, I have an update: I was in the changing room when I realized my hair color has changed. My old scars have disappeared as well.”

Rio removed the artifact that changed his hair color. He considered keeping it hidden to prevent Aishia from worrying, but it was something she would notice sooner or later. Thus, he chose to be honest about it.

“...”

The change in his hair color and disappearance of his scars was proof of how his physical body was approaching something less human and more spirit-like.

Without knowing what kind of aftereffects it would have, Aishia frowned bitterly.

Having expected that reaction, Rio hurried to finish his update and change the topic.

“It’s a good thing that my scars have disappeared, and there haven’t been any negative changes so far. You don’t have to look so upset about it. More importantly, there’s something I wanted to ask regarding the heroes. If heroes are able to freely use their Divine Arms whenever they want, does that mean they’re constantly assimilated with their upper high rank spirits?”

“Yeah...” Aishia confirmed.

“In that case, the heroes are at a similar risk of assimilation effects, right? Wouldn’t it be more dangerous for them, since they’re perpetually assimilated...?”

Indeed, didn’t that mean the heroes were bearing the same burden as him? Especially if they were constantly in an assimilated state.

But as far as Rio knew, Satsuki and the others hadn’t changed in appearance. What was the reason for that? He couldn’t help but find it strange.

“The risk of the heroes being perpetually assimilated is low enough to ignore.”

“Hmm... How come?”

“In their daily lives, the heroes are only assimilated by a few percent. The only times the percentage goes up is when they take out their Divine Arms and fight. Even when they use their hero powers, that percentage only goes up to seventy or eighty percent...I believe. There may be other special protections included in the spirit bond between the heroes and the upper high rank spirits, but that is the main reason.”

“So if the degree of assimilation is low, there’s basically no risk? It’s harmless enough to stay constantly assimilated?”

“Yep. If they maintain a state of a few percent outside of combat, then there shouldn’t be any risk to continuous assimilation. Combat may temporarily raise

that percentage, but their existence as a human should remain stable if they stay under fifty percent.”

“So fifty percent is the line for when one’s being becomes unstable. In other words, one should avoid the frequent use of assimilating over fifty percent. Is that correct?”

“Yes. The higher the number, the shorter the duration of assimilation should be. This applies to you and me as well.”

“It sounds as though as long as the degree of assimilation is kept low, it isn’t a problem.”

In which case, as long as they stuck to those rules of use, assimilation could be a reassuring secret weapon to have in a fight. On top of increasing one’s basic strength and vitality, it also allowed the use of a Spirit Arms.

“But when you use your transcendent powers, you have to have as strong an assimilation as possible. Otherwise your body won’t survive the backlash.”

“I thought that the heroes were able to survive using their hero power because they were assimilated with upper high rank spirits... But Saint Erica died because she was unable to handle the backlash, right?”

“Erica died because the Six Wise Gods set a limit preventing the heroes from fully assimilating with the spirits. Like I said just now, the most their assimilation can reach is seventy or eighty percent when using their powers.”

In other words, a seventy or eighty percent assimilation wasn’t enough to endure the recoil of their powers.

“Why did the Six Wise Gods set such a limit? A stronger assimilation would prevent the heroes from dying...”

“The Six Wise Gods created the hero summoning because they wanted to use the upper high rank spirits’ powers without reviving the spirits themselves. A strong assimilation creates the danger of the hero being possessed by the upper high rank spirit. That’s why there are conditions and seals on the spirit bond to prevent them from surfacing.”

“It sounds like there are complicated circumstances at hand, but at the same

time, that means the heroes are safe as long as they don't use their hero powers, right? There isn't a high risk of the rest of the heroes ending up like Saint Erica...is there?"

"There isn't. Generally speaking, the spirit bond between heroes and upper high rank spirits favors the hero. The hero has the power over the assimilation, so there is little risk of their body being possessed. But if they push themselves to their limits, using all of their healing power like the Saint did, then the upper high rank spirit could potentially steal control of their body."

"So as long as they don't end up in a dangerous fight, Miharu and Satsuki will be fine being near each other."

"Yep."

"That being said, keeping the heroes off the battlefield is just delaying the issue. In order to solve the problem at its core, we have to settle the rage of the upper high rank spirits, right?"

"Yeah... That would be ideal."

"But the upper high rank spirit in Erica saw Miharu and you as Lina and tried to take his anger out on both of you. Yeah?"

"Yep, because Lina is Miharu's past self. And..."

"And your past self too?"

"I think so, yes."

It wasn't wrong. However, it wasn't exactly correct either. Aishia nodded to convey that nuance, then added, "The upper high rank spirits think Lina betrayed them along with the Six Wise Gods."

"Betrayed..."

Just what had happened between Lina and the other Wise Gods?

"If there's nothing else you want to know, I'll explain why the upper high rank spirits resent the Seven Wise Gods in detail, along with the other events of the past."

"In that case, please do."

“Okay. It all started a thousand years ago—actually, it was even longer ago than that. There was one god in the world, who had fourteen transcendent ones as followers. The Dragon King, the Six Great Spirits, and the Seven Wise Gods,” Aishia said, beginning her story.

“The Dragon King...”

Rio reacted to the familiar word. When he was fighting Erica, the other person within Erica had called him that.

“You’re the Dragon King,” Aishia stated flatly.

“I’m...” Rio stumbled over his words.

“Just like how Amakawa Haruto was your past life, Amakawa Haruto’s past life was the Dragon King.”

“I see...”

A past life to a past life sounded truly dubious. But Rio would never doubt Aishia’s words. Besides, he had already been told Miharuru’s past life was the Wise God Lina, and with his own past life as Amakawa Haruto, it wouldn’t be strange for Amakawa Haruto to have had a past life too. Thus, he wasn’t all that surprised.

“God created the world, then managed it along with the transcendent ones. But one day, god disappeared from the world. Only the fourteen transcendent ones remained. But god left orders for the transcendent ones before leaving, and there were also several rules left in place to fulfill those orders.”

“Go on.”

“After the god disappeared from the world, the transcendent ones obeyed those rules and cooperated with each other to manage the world in the god’s place. However, their assertiveness for management was greatly different from when god was around.”

“How so?”

“When god was around, god would interfere with mankind by giving the occasional prophecies and divine punishment. God decided the path mankind would walk on and the structure of their society, and humans lived obeying

god. When humans ignored prophecies and did evil deeds, god would nip them in the bud with divine punishment. That way, the world proceeded in the direction god wanted. It was a utopia where every life lived in harmony. That was the world before god left.”

However, god abandoned that utopia and left its management to the transcendent ones.

Why did god leave the world...?

That was the question in Rio’s head, but he kept quiet so as to not disrupt Aishia’s talk.

“And then came what happened after god left the world. The transcendent ones were bestowed roles before god left. They were ordered to limit their management of the world to a minimum. Without the guidance of god, mankind began its own journey. As a result, the opinions of the people clashed, creating individual differences in values. What was once a single collected mass broke into several smaller groups, creating gaps in social status and wealth, and war broke out among mankind.”

That sounded like the inevitable outcome. In fact, it sounded no different from the current world. Humans were creatures with their own free wills.

As far as Rio knew, there was no way of uniting human values and eliminating conflicts. If such a thing were possible, there would be no need for war. He had no idea how the god had managed to achieve that.

“The world was in much more disarray compared to when god was around. But the transcendent ones stuck to god’s orders and watched silently. They only interfered with the world when something they couldn’t overlook happened—in order to fulfill their roles.”

“So it wasn’t that different from the current world, huh?”

“Apart from the existence of the transcendent ones, yes. There’s a balance between the major nations right now, but that wasn’t the case in the past. There was much more war and death, and some of the transcendent ones lamented over the fallen world. Some even felt despair.”

Why did the god leave? The omniscient and omnipotent god should have

known that this would happen to the world—that the world would become unjust.

That was what they probably thought. Having assisted god in managing the utopia firsthand, the transcendent ones were all the more disappointed.

“That was why they wished for the injustice to be gone from the world. They decided to do something as the transcendent ones that had been bestowed roles.”

Aishia paused. “And that was the beginning of everything.”

“The ones who wanted to do something were the Seven Wise Gods. They wanted to bring back the god that had disappeared to another dimension, and began researching ways to open a hole between dimensions,” she continued.

“It was difficult even with the abilities of the transcendent ones. Using space sorcery was impossible—it would literally take a god to accomplish. However, they actually achieved some results. They couldn’t locate where the god had gone, but they managed to observe the existence of another dimension.”

All of it was in order to bring the god back to this world.

“After that, the Seven Wise Gods began experimenting with ways to open a hole between dimensions. Although their research was difficult, they overcame each problem one by one and progressed forward. The Seven Wise Gods weren’t completely united. Although they shared the overall goal of bringing god back to the world, their true intentions and thoughts differed. Everyone other than Lina had lost all hope for mankind’s injustice to be quashed. That was why they tried to open the hole despite knowing the dangers it could bring. Lina tried to stop them, but failed. They imprisoned her and became the Six Wise Gods.”

“Keep going...”

There were many things he wanted to ask about, but doing so would cause Aishia to digress from her tale. Rio didn’t want that.

“With Lina imprisoned, the Six Wise Gods continued their experiments. Then, they finally succeeded in opening a hole to a dimension of their choice. That was one thousand years ago.”

“That was around the time of the...”

If it was one thousand years ago, then...

Rio recalled the events throughout history in his head.

“Yup, the start of the Divine War. The Six Wise Gods succeeded in their experiment, resulting in that.”

“It feels like I just heard something unthinkable.” Rio sighed, leaning back in his seat heavily. Part of him wanted to ask for more time to help him organize his thoughts, but now that they had come this far, he resigned himself to listening to the rest. He leaned forward to listen to Aishia once more.

“As a result of the hole in the dimension, a demon army started invading from another world. The location was the west end of the Strahl region. The other world had beings on par with the transcendent ones, but above all, the number of monsters was overwhelming.”

It was clear that mankind would suffer as a consequence.

“In order to resist the forces from the other world, the Six Wise Gods taught mankind magic and sorcery. They also produced powerful magic artifacts beyond the technologies of the time. That helped keep the war at a standstill for a while, but they lacked a deciding factor. That was when they sought the assistance of the upper high rank spirits and the Dragon King. They even went to Lina for help.”

The Divine War was enough of a reason for the upper high rank spirits and the Dragon King to act.

“The problem was that the Six Wise Gods had already lost Lina’s trust. If they told the upper high rank spirits and Dragon King the truth of what happened, they would risk incurring their wrath. And so, the Six Wise Gods released Lina first.”

They sought Lina’s cooperation in explaining the series of events to the upper high rank spirits and Dragon King, and in asking them for their help. Thus, they sent Lina off as a messenger to the upper high rank spirits and Dragon King.

“Their attempt to remove injustice from the world had invited more injustice

into the world. Lina felt terrible regret for being unable to stop the trigger of the Divine War. That's why she accepted the role of messenger and headed to the upper high rank spirits and Dragon King to apologize, and ask for their cooperation. Thus, the first place she went to was the spirits."

At the time, the upper high rank spirits were all gathered in the Wilderness. The spirit folk had already established their village there, living quietly without any human contact as they did now.

"The upper high rank spirits were angered, but they headed to Strahl with their disciple spirits in order to remove the external threat. The spirit folk also joined the war when they realized that. Lina then left to find the Dragon King."

The added forces should have given this world the advantage in the war...

"That was when a new problem appeared. Shortly after the upper high rank spirits left the Wilderness, while Lina was gone to persuade the Dragon King, the other world's army appeared in a part of Yagumo."

...but they had apparently been teleported from Strahl.

"That must have been quite the difficult situation..."

"And that wasn't all. By the time Lina convinced the Dragon King to join the war, the six upper high rank spirits headed for Strahl had disappeared—to be precise, they had been incorporated into the core of the hero-summoning system by the Six Wise Gods. Lina tried to release them, but failed. That's why the upper high rank spirits believe Lina betrayed them along with the Six Wise Gods. They consider them the Seven Wise Gods, and they detest them."

"I see..." With this, Rio finally understood what happened a thousand years ago.

"Ever since then, Lina joined hands with the Dragon King. They cleared up the enemy forces in the Yagumo region, then headed to Strahl to end the Divine War."

"I feel like you skipped some of the story there... Like how they ended the war, or what happened to the Six Wise Gods."

"The truth is, I don't know anything about that. I don't know how the war

ended as well. I don't know if it's because I don't have the memories, or I just don't remember it. Everything surrounding that is rather fuzzy..." Frustrated by the feeling, Aishia touched her forehead with her right hand.

"All I know is that the Dragon King used up so much of his power, his life was in danger. Lina had also exhausted everything, and she saw a disturbing prophecy in such a state. That is why she tried to reincarnate herself and created me—all in order to return the Dragon King's power to his reincarnated self..." Searching through her buried memories as she spoke, Aishia stared into space with unfocused eyes.

"What I don't quite get is the part where Miharu is Lina's reincarnation, while you're also Lina in a way...? You said Lina created you, but..." Rio asked Aishia a new question to awaken her memories.

"Yeah... I'm a humanoid spirit that Lina created herself. Just before she reincarnated, she gave me the power the Dragon King needed to...needed to..." Aishia pressed her head into her hands as though to suppress a headache.

"You don't have to force yourself to remember," Rio assured her in a fluster.

"The memories inside of me are a copy of Lina's memories from a thousand years ago... When she created me, Lina was close to death... That's why Lina told me..."

At that moment, Aishia's eyes were locked on Rio's, but she wasn't seeing him. Instead, what she saw was none other than herself.



Why?

"I'm sorry. There's no time. He's going to die before I can copy everything over. I have to leave everything to the two of you, one thousand years in the future."

With a bloody hand, she drew a complex magic circle on the floor. In front of her stood a blank-eyed Aishia.

"He's a very gentle person, so please look after him... Because I will be completely powerless when I reincarnate."

She directed her blurry gaze to the center of the circle. There was a man lying there, on the verge of breathing his last breath. For some reason, she instinctively knew he was the Dragon King.

“...” Aishia nodded with a dazed look. At that moment, everything clicked into place. These weren’t Aishia’s memories.

They were Lina’s.

“I have to trigger the reincarnation process before he dies. I’m going to activate the spirit bond. Now, it’s time for you to rest within him...”

Lina converted her life force into magic essence, activating the greater spell of the gods. And with that, Aishia...

“Aishia...? Aishia?” Rio called.



“Aishia? Aishia!”

“What...?” Aishia finally blinked her eyes, which were wide open, snapping back to her senses.

“You zoned out for a second there. Everything okay?” Rio asked worriedly.

“...” Without giving a reply, Aishia suddenly vanished. She had returned to her spirit form...

“Huh?”

...only to reappear beside Rio in her material form. She then clung to Rio lovingly.

“Erm... Aishia?” Rio was confused by her sudden actions. He called her name in concern, wondering what was the matter.

“I remember why my memories are so fragmented. I received an incomplete copy of Lina’s memories. That’s why there’s a lot I don’t know,” Aishia said, still clinging to Rio.

“I see.”

“I have Lina’s memories, but I’m not Lina. Miharu too—she’s Lina’s reincarnation, but she isn’t Lina herself.”

“Yeah, I know that. I feel the same way.”

Honestly, hearing that Miharu was Lina’s reincarnation didn’t particularly bring forth any special emotions. Miharu was Miharu. Aishia was Aishia. That was what Rio truly felt about them.

“The memories I have of a thousand years ago aren’t perfect, but there’s one thing I know: Lina and the Dragon King had something they wanted to accomplish no matter what. Even if they had to reincarnate to do it,” Aishia said with certainty. Then, she added, “But Haruto is Haruto—and also Rio. Miharu is Miharu. You’re neither the Dragon King nor the Wise God Lina. That’s why there’s no need for the two of you to be bound by your past lives.”

“Indeed, that may be true.”

While Rio could still relate to Amakawa Haruto, he honestly felt nothing towards this Dragon King he had no memories of, who was apparently the past life of his past life.

“But I’m the reincarnation of that Dragon King, right? Not only do I have his soul, but I have his powers too.”

At the very least, Rio didn’t reject his past-past life as the Dragon King.

“There’s no need for Haruto to be burdened by this. The same goes for Miharu.”

Aishia was trying to carry the entire burden alone. That was what the look on her face was saying. What if this time, Rio was the one pushed to the brink of death? What had happened in memories that had belonged to Lina could happen to her. Aishia looked extremely anxious as she insisted that both Rio and Miharu were different from the Dragon King and Wise God Lina.

“That’s right. I can’t imagine myself living as the Dragon King, and I don’t plan on doing so. But the same goes for you too, right? Aishia is Aishia. Your memories don’t matter.”

“Lina gave me a duty to fulfill...”

This was something she had to do. Aishia tried to shoulder that burden alone.

“Then I will help you. Let’s share the burden of what you’re trying to do,” Rio

offered without any hesitation.

“But... It could be extremely dangerous. Even the powerful Dragon King was pushed to the brink of death a thousand years ago.”

“That’s why you want to do this alone. Is that what you’re saying?” Rio asked, seeing straight through Aishia’s thoughts.

“I don’t want you to die,” Aishia admitted anxiously.

At that, Rio chuckled softly. “I feel the same. I don’t want you to die either—that’s why I can’t let you go through this alone. I’m the only one who can use the Dragon King’s powers anyway, right?”

Then, he hugged Aishia back. It was an expression of his determination not to let Aishia do this alone.

“...” Aishia was clearly hesitating over whether she could hug him back harder.

“You don’t know what to do right now, so instead of thinking too deeply over it, let’s do this together.” Rio patted her back as if he were soothing a child.

“Okay...”

Aishia sounded teary as she nodded, burying her face in Rio’s chest.



How much time passed after that? Not much. Perhaps not even a single minute.

“...” Aishia slowly raised her face from Rio’s chest to look up at him.

“Are you okay now?”

“Yup.”

“That’s good. Then...”

Rio was just about to resume their conversation when he remembered how closely pressed together they were. Their current position was Rio sitting in a chair with Aishia leaning down to hug him.

“How about you sit down before we talk?” Rio suggested awkwardly. He

stood up and picked up Aishia's petite body, moving her to sit in the chair beside him before sitting down in his original seat himself.

"I've already told you all that I remember. What else would you like to know?"

"I'd like to know more about the rules the god set, I guess. Right now, everyone's forgotten about me. You said I shouldn't meet them anymore—did that have something to do with those rules?"

"Yeah."

"Do you remember what kind of rules they were?"

"I do. The transcendent ones were the ones tasked with managing the world in god's place. But they possessed enough power to destroy the world if they so wished. That was why god established rules to prevent individuals or groups from using or receiving the power of the transcendent ones for their own benefit."

"Every time a transcendent one uses their power, the world forgets them," Aishia stated.

"Do they forget everything to do with the transcendent one?"

"Yes. Any information that could identify the transcendent one is removed from their memories."

"But the legend of the Six Wise Gods and upper high rank spirits still exist across the world."

"Even if you can't identify who the transcendent one is, you can still be aware that there are transcendent ones in this world, and read the records of what they have done. You just can't retain any memory of who the transcendent ones are as an individual."

As a result, the transcendent ones were mostly treated as folklore.

"So once the memories are gone, they can't be recalled ever again? What if you told the person who forgot the reason why their memories are gone?" Rio asked, searching for a loophole.

"I think they'd forget again the moment you told them. I don't know what will

happen if they lose their memories over and over again, so I can't recommend it. Besides, it's hard for a transcendent one to live normally. Even if you contact them while concealing your identity, there's no telling when they'll suddenly forget you again."

"Is it sorcery? Or a spirit art? No, it seems impossible to do something that can affect the entire world..."

"It's only possible because it was god."

"How terrifying..."

The scale of what was happening was so big, Rio could barely get his words out.

"Is that your only warning about the rules?" he asked.

"There are still other rules..." But Aishia seemed reluctant to go into detail.

"You don't have to worry—tell me." Rio was already prepared to hear it, his expression tightening as he urged her to go on.

"Even if you don't use your transcendent powers, you must not provide support or assistance to a particular group or individual. A transcendent one must use their strength for the sake of the world. However, the interests of the world can sometimes overlap with the interests of a group or individual—this is an exception to the rule. Other exceptions include legitimate self-defense and fulfilling one's duty as a transcendent one. Transcendent ones also cannot forget other transcendent ones."

"What if the transcendent one uses their power for someone outside of those exceptions?"

"Then the transcendent one will be the one to forget whom they helped."

The second rule Aishia mentioned had a price that couldn't be easily accepted, even with prior knowledge. Losing one's memories of someone you wanted to help meant forgetting why you wanted to help them in the first place.

Transcendent powers were so great that they could easily disrupt the power balance of the world. As such, this was a perfectly reasonable rule for the god

to create, but it was terribly cruel.

“So that’s why I need to stay away from everyone.”

“Yeah...” Aishia mumbled sadly, hanging her head in confirmation.

“Supporting someone won’t activate the rule immediately either,” she added, worrying for Rio. “I don’t know if it’s in order to judge the necessity of your actions, but there’s a little time lag before the rule is applied. Thus, continuously staying together with someone could eventually cause the rule to come into effect.”

“So there’s no way of knowing how far you can go before you lose your memories. Indeed, that means I shouldn’t approach the others carelessly.”

“Yeah...”

“This probably goes without saying, but just to confirm—I’m a transcendent one right now...right? So those rules currently apply to me.”

“Yup. Ever since you used the powers, you became a transcendent one. Since I was assimilated with you, the world sees me as one as well. Saint Erica was also considered one in the earlier battle.”

In other words, if Rio wanted to interfere with anything in the future, he would have to be prepared to lose all his memories of everyone.

“I see... Thanks, I got it now.” Rio’s voice came out quiet and shaky—he probably feared the idea of forgetting everyone.

The only person that needs to be forgotten is me.

Those were the words Aishia said before going to stop the rampaging spirit alone. But she wasn’t just in danger of being forgotten—she could have forgotten everyone as well. Perhaps she should have shouldered the burden alone after all. Such thoughts from back then filled her head at this late stage, making Aishia hang her head gravely.

“It’s okay. I don’t regret anything,” Rio said with a soft smile, guessing what she was thinking. “I’m glad you didn’t have to have to end up being forgotten alone,” he said sincerely.

“...”

“Let’s think about what to do another day. It may be inconvenient having to avoid everyone, but at least we won’t forget each other. I’m truly glad to have you by my side, Aishia,” Rio said, reaching out to pat Aishia’s head lightly.

“Because of the rules, the transcendent ones rarely appeared in front of people in the past. But that was why transcendent ones were allowed to have disciples,” Aishia said, suddenly bringing up a new term.

“Disciples...?”

“Disciples cannot forget the transcendent ones either. They are bound by the same rules and serve as the arms and legs of the transcendent ones to prevent them from being identified.”

“So I had disciples as well?”

“A thousand years ago, yes... I believe.”

“Do you know anything about the Dragon King’s disciples?”

“There’s nothing in the memories Lina left me, I don’t think. I can’t remember.”

“I see... Well, it’s been a thousand years, after all.”

It was hard to believe they were still alive. Even if they were, there was no way for Rio to know where they were, since he had no memories of the Dragon King. Would the disciples even recognize him as the Dragon King?

“There’s a special connection between a transcendent one and their disciples. That’s why you should be able to summon them to you... I think.”

“How do I summon them?”

“I don’t know...”

The Dragon King was dead, after all. There was a chance there was no connection left between them.

“Do I just say ‘Come here, my disciples!’ or something? Ha ha.”

Anything was worth trying once. Rio held out his hand and uttered the first words that came to his mind. He chuckled shyly right after, embarrassed at his own words.

But it happened immediately after that. The space before his hand warped, as though space sorcery had been activated.

“Huh...?”

A young girl appeared. She appeared to be less than ten years old—a second or third grader in elementary school in Japan. Her clothes weren’t of a Strahl style, but a style often seen in the Yagumo region.

“It is I, the great disciple of the Dragon King! Long time no see, my lord! I have missed you greatly!”

With an exaggerated hand gesture, the girl bowed her head in reverence, announcing her entrance at the top of her lungs. However, there was something strange.

“Hmm, that’s a little arrogant. But it’s been a thousand years since our last meeting, so I have to greet him properly...”

The girl hummed, turning her head as though she didn’t like those words. It seemed she didn’t realize Rio and Aishia were beside her. She wasn’t even looking in their direction.

“...” Rio stared at the girl in shock.

“Huh...?” It was at this point that the girl finally noticed Rio and Aishia.

“Umm... Nice to meet you,” Rio said, bowing his head politely.

“P-Pardon my rudeness! Dragon King!”

The girl turned red on the spot, then bowed low enough to prostrate herself on the ground.



Chapter 3: Disciple

“Dragon King!” the little girl exclaimed, bowing down before them.

“Err... Could you lift your head first?” Rio said, calling out to the girl nervously.

“I-I wouldn’t dare! I couldn’t do such a discourtesy to you...”

The girl kept her head lowered in absolute obedience. Rio was troubled with how to respond, a disconcerted look on his face.

“You...can tell I’m the Dragon King?” he asked.

“Yes! The Dragon King is the only person in this world who can summon me! I can feel the connection between us! Your appearance may have changed, but I’m sure there’s a reason for that...” the girl declared without hesitation, her head still bowed low.

“I see... But could you please lift your head after all? How about we all sit down?”

“I-Is it really okay?”

“Of course. I’m the one asking you. Please get up.”

Seeing such a little girl lying flat in submission was rather stressful on the mind. Rio immediately offered her a hand up.

“Th-Thank you very much!” The little girl fearfully raised her head, accepting Rio’s hand in delight. After she stood up and let go of him, she stared at her own hand with sparkling eyes. It was the reaction of someone who had just shaken hands with their favorite celebrity.

This girl is the Dragon King’s disciple, right...? Rio thought as he watched her awkwardly.

“R-Right, how about you sit down over there...” he started, inviting her to sit down when he noticed her staring at Aishia dubiously. “Is something the matter?” he asked.

“I-I can sense that woman’s aura coming from her,” she said glumly, pointing to Aishia.

“Who?”

“The Wise God Lina!” the girl huffed indignantly.

“You can tell that as well?”

“Why is she here?!”

For some reason, the girl pouted sullenly. Sensing that something serious was wrong, Rio hesitantly asked for clarification. “U-Umm... What do you mean?”

“Were you with this woman for the last thousand years?”

“No... First of all, she isn’t Lina.”

“Huh?”

“And I’m not the Dragon King.”

“WHAT?!”

“To be precise, I don’t have any memories of the Dragon King...”

“M-Memories? What?” The girl blinked in shock. “You mean you don’t remember me?!”

“Yeah...” Rio nodded, unable to lie to her.

“That can’t be...” Tears welled in the girl’s eyes. If she was truly the Dragon King’s disciple, then there was no way she was as old as she looked. She had to be over a thousand years old.

However, she didn’t look a day over ten years old, and the way she was on the verge of bursting into tears made her seem even younger.

“Umm... Sorry.” Rio bowed his head out of guilt.

“Ah... N-No! Please raise your head! That’s not what I meant! I’m sorry I lost my composure!” the girl gasped, bobbing her head up and down in a fluster.

“No, I’m sure we’re both just as confused,” Rio said to reassure her. “Why don’t you take a seat now?”

“E-Excuse me!” The girl finally sat down as suggested.

“Are you okay with cold tea?”

“Y-Yes, gladly! Thank you!” the girl replied meekly.

“*Dissolvo.*” Rio reached into the Time-Space Cache to take out a metal tumbler and snacks. “Here you go,” he said, offering the tea to the girl.

“Th-Thank you very much! That’s a pretty container...” The girl nervously stuttered her gratitude, then gazed at the metal cup in amazement. The metal tumbler was a dwarf-made product that could keep drinks cold, so Rio often made use of it.

“Here you go. Help yourself to the snacks.”

“Okay...” The girl accepted the tumbler with both hands and took a sip of the tea. “Wow, it’s nice!”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“The snacks are delicious too!”

“Take as many as you want.” Rio smiled at the sight of the girl happily munching away.

I assumed she’d been alive since the Dragon King’s time, but perhaps she’s much younger than that?

He wondered to himself.

“Here, use this.” Aishia offered the girl a damp tea towel to wipe her mouth.

“Thank you...” The girl happily wiped at her mouth. But she soon realized how childish she was acting and blushed in embarrassment. “Umm! Forget that!”

“Then let’s start with introductions, shall we?” Rio suggested kindly.

“R-Right!”

“I’m Rio. I was born and raised in the Strahl region, but my parents came from the Karasuki Kingdom in Yagumo. I’m almost seventeen years old.”

“Master Rio...”

The little girl’s eyes widened. She called Rio’s name slowly, as though to process it.

Rio introduced Aishia next. “This is Aishia. She’s a humanoid spirit created by the Wise God Lina, and she has a contract established with me.”

“Aishia... Hmm...” The girl gazed at Aishia warily. She seemed to have rather complex feelings towards Lina. Sensing that—

“She’s inherited part of Lina’s memories, but Aishia and Lina are different people,” Rio added in warning.

“Okay...”

“Aishia only regained Lina’s memories today. That was when she told me I was the reincarnation of the Dragon King...” Rio explained while he watched the girl’s reactions. Would she believe he had been reborn?

“So the Dragon King reincarnated,” the girl said with a conflicted frown.

Rio’s eyes widened in surprise. “You believe me.”

“I would never doubt the Dragon King!”

“R-Right.”

“Besides, Lina said the Seven Wise Gods were researching such things.”

“Have you met Lina before?”

“Yes. She’s the one who dragged the Dragon King to the Divine War. He ended the war, but the connection between us cut off at the same time... Until today, that is.”

Was it because she was looking back on the past? Or was it because she was overwhelmed by the emotions of a thousand years without the Dragon King? Either way, tears slowly welled in the girl’s adorable eyes.

“I see...” Rio replied quietly, feeling sympathy for her.

“So the Dragon King died after all.”

“...”

It was easy to confirm that fact, but he didn’t want to be the one to trigger the flow of tears threatening to fall at any moment. Rio held his tongue with a pained look.

“I-It’s okay! I’m not crying!” she sobbed. She wanted to know the truth. It was clear she was crying, but she insisted against it and wiped her tears away.

That was enough to convince Rio. “He died right after the war. And now, one thousand years later, his soul is in my body...or something...”

“And you don’t have memories of the past.”

“Yeah... The Dragon King is the past life of my past life, so while I have memories of my past life, there’s nothing left of the Dragon King.”

“The Dragon King reincarnated not once, but twice?”

“Yup. The first reincarnation happened in a different world from here, and I never remembered anything to do with the Dragon King there.”

The girl pouted unhappily. “But you have memories of your reincarnation this time? Isn’t that strange? Why is it only the Dragon King’s memories...”

“Indeed, I also find it strange that I have memories of my past life, but nothing of the Dragon King.”

Rio had the same questions as the girl, and turned to look at Aishia in case she had an answer.

Aishia replied by relying on Lina’s knowledge. “When people of this world move to another world—be it through reincarnation or teleportation—they’ll lose their memories. Lina didn’t know the exact details behind this, but it was probably another one of the god’s rules.”

“I see...”

“If anyone arrives from outside this world, they’ll still retain their memories. But this doesn’t apply to residents of this world who leave and come back again. They’re not considered a resident of the outside world, so they can’t keep their memories.”

“So that’s why I’ve lost my memories as Dragon King... But Aishia still regained her memories as Lina. Why is that?”

“Th-That’s right! How come you can remember? Did you find some kind of exception to the rule?!” The girl immediately latched onto Rio’s question and pressed Aishia for an answer. She seemed to believe there was hope for Rio to

regain his memories as the Dragon King.

“That, I don’t know... The rule should have applied when I left the world with the Dragon King’s soul. That’s why I had no memories for a long time.”

The girl was desperate. “Please figure out why! There’s got to be a loophole!”

“The memories I have as Lina aren’t actually my memories. They’re not memories I experience in person, but knowledge that was copied. Perhaps that’s why?” Aishia guessed, sounding somewhat unsure.

“That’s not the reason! That woman must have found a loophole—I just know it! She must have known how to break god’s rules.”

“You can break them...?” Rio asked with widened eyes.

“The Seven Wise Gods were researching ways to slip past the god’s rules. I know they found a way to at least soften the effects.”

As soon as she said that, the girl chanted *Dissolvo*. She appeared to possess a magic artifact similar to Rio’s Time-Space Cache—there was a bracelet on her arm that looked different from Rio’s armband. She took out a mask from within the space.

“What’s this mask for?”

“A spare of the mask that the Dragon King and Lina wore a thousand years ago. Wearing this will weaken the effects of the rules applied on the transcendent ones.”

“Does an item like that exist?” Rio gulped.

“Not to my knowledge.”

The item was unfamiliar to Aishia as well. Her memories as Lina were incomplete, after all.

But the item was a ray of light to Rio. “So if I wear this, the effects of memory loss will weaken?” he asked hopefully.

“The transcendent one involved will evade memory loss, but the wide-scale memory-wiping effect of using transcendent powers is unavoidable.”

“I see...”

It seemed things wouldn't work out so easily.

"Transcendent ones mustn't provide support for the interests of an individual or group, even if that support doesn't involve their power. Transcendent ones must only move for the benefit of everyone. There are other rules that are affected, but these are the main ones this mask will soften."

"So if I wear this, I'll be able to use my strength to fight for others and help them?"

"There's a time limit involved, but yes. This item is imperfect and degrades upon use. The mask has to take the constant burden of the rule, and it eventually breaks under that weight."

"How many masks are there?"

"Five."

"Mass-producing them..."

"Is impossible. At least for me. These were created by Lina, so the only chance of making more would be through Lina..." The girl looked at Aishia.

"I don't know how to make them," she said apologetically, shaking her head.

"Which means the Dragon King can only fight for someone else's sake five times. I will leave all the masks with you." The girl uttered the discharge spell and placed the remaining four masks on the table.

"Are you sure...?"

"Of course. They belong to the Dragon King."

"Thank you..." Rio picked up one of the masks.

"The masks will automatically fix in place when you put it on. They won't come off unless the wearer orders them to come off—or unless they break first."

"I see..."

Rio tentatively held the mask against his face. Then, like the little girl described, it fixed to his face without budging. There had to be some kind of sorcery behind it, but there was no discomfort from wearing it. His vision was

also clear.

“You should hold onto one as well, Aishia.”

“All right.”

“How come...?” the girl asked in confusion, seeing Rio hand Aishia a mask.

“I can only use the Dragon King’s transcendent powers when I’m assimilated with Aishia. That’s why she’s recognized as a transcendent one as well.”

The girl leaned forward in shock. “Huh?! The Dragon King assimilated with a spirit?! With this woman here?!”

“I have what’s called a spirit bond with Aishia. As a human, I can’t endure the burden of using transcendent powers... That’s why I have to be assimilated with Aishia to become more like a spirit. Does that make sense?” Rio explained to the girl hesitantly.

“W-Well...” The girl pouted and glared at Aishia.

“Come to think of it—does this mask have any effects on nontranscendents?” Rio asked, using the question that just popped into his mind to change the topic.

“It can hide the aura of species with spirit bodies... The effect was designed for disciples with spirit bodies, so it naturally works on spirits too. It should be able to hide the ridiculously conspicuous spirit aura flowing from that woman.”

“So an effect like that exists... All the more reason for Aishia to wear one, then.”

“I’ll try it on.” Aishia picked up a mask and held it up to her face. The mask affixed itself like it did with Rio.

“Well?” she asked, wondering whether her aura had been hidden.

“I can’t detect spirit presences to begin with.”

“Don’t worry. It’s been hidden properly,” the little girl answered in Rio’s place.

“That’s good. Does it look okay?” Aishia asked, tilting her head.

“Yeah, it suits you well.”

“Thank you. Now we match.”

The girl pouted in envy at Rio and Aishia’s casual exchange. “Hmph!”

Sensing her gaze, Rio turned his attention back to her. “Umm, come to think of it, we haven’t asked for your name yet. Sorry about that—will you tell us your name?”

For a brief moment, a sad look flashed across the girl’s face. “I’m... Sora...” she murmured.

“Sora? That’s a lovely name.”

“Thank you... The Dragon King gave it to me. I’m very proud of it.”

She was particularly fond of her name, which was why she was all the more upset to hear the reincarnation of the Dragon King had forgotten it. However, hearing Rio compliment her name had helped the smile return to her face.

“I see... It’s nice to meet you, Sora.”

“It’s nice to meet you again, Dragon King!” Sora giggled happily. This was probably her true and frank self.

“I’m not used to being called by the title of Dragon King, so I’d prefer it if you called me Rio,” Rio asked a little awkwardly.

“I-I couldn’t dare to do such a thing...!”

Sora flattened herself on the table in submission.

“But...” Rio was about to say something, but decided to change the subject instead. “Err, speaking of which, what was the Dragon King’s name?”

“His name was Master Ryuo...”

“Wait, isn’t that...” Rio’s eyes widened. He had heard that name before—it was the name of the legendary figure that Hayate, Gouki’s inspector son, had spoken of when visiting the village in Karasuki Kingdom while Rio was there.

“Did you remember something?”

“No, but I’ve heard of the name before, when I was in the Karasuki Kingdom in Yagumo. He was the legendary warrior that drove back the demon army that infiltrated the Yagumo region...”

“Ah, I was the one who spread that legend,” Sora said offhandedly.

“Huh?!” Rio was rather shocked. He was meeting the origin of an age-long legend in a way he never would have expected. His surprise was only natural.

“I couldn’t forgive the people who were living their carefree lives after criticizing the Dragon King. They even had the nerve to forget him! That’s why I educated the king of the kingdom and spread the legend,” Sora huffed proudly.

“Aha ha... Well, that makes sense. I heard there was someone who was together with Ryuo—who fought together with him. That must have been the Wise God Lina, right?”

Setting aside how Sora could have educated the king at the time, Rio recalled the details of the legend and compared it with what he’d just found out about the transcendent ones. However...

“Oh, that’s...” Sora started as though to point out a mistake.

“Hm? Was I wrong?”

“N-No, you’re right!” she squeaked.

I-I can’t correct him and say it was me! But at this rate, he’ll think that woman had a special relationship with the Dragon King...! Sora groaned at her inner turmoil.

“Along with you,” Rio added.

“Huh?”

“You helped the Dragon King too, didn’t you? That’s why I’ll say it in his place: thank you.”

“I-It was nothing! The Dragon King already praised me for it back then!” Sora stuttered, ducking her head to hide her blush.

“But that makes you much older than me, right? Would you rather I addressed you with more respect... Like Lady Sora?” While he didn’t want to touch upon the subject of a woman’s age, Rio suspected Sora was over a thousand years older than him. Instead of pondering whether it was all right to continue treating her like a child, he decided to outright ask about it.

“N-No, I don’t want that! The Dragon King is my eternal master and guardian!”

“A-Are you sure?” Rio was astounded by the force with which she spoke.

“Yes! Besides, my physical and mental growth stopped developing from the moment I became a disciple of the Dragon King. That’s why the years I’ve lived don’t matter! Please treat me like a follower! A-And preferably like your own child... A-Ah, no, I mean I don’t mind if you treat me like a child!” Embarrassed at how she blurted out everything in her chest one go, Sora’s voice cracked.

“Yup, okay... Then, Sora it is.” There were a few curious points she’d mentioned in her rush of words, but Rio chose not to touch upon any of it for now.

“Right!” Sora rejoiced with an elated grin. She seemed nothing like a thousand-year-old being like this—she was just a child. It wasn’t that hard to believe her mental growth had been halted like she claimed.

“I was also wondering... What species are you, Sora? You look just like a human...”

She was capable of sensing spirit presences that humans couldn’t detect, and she had been alive since the Divine War. The way the development of her mind and body had frozen after she became the Dragon King’s disciple was also curious, so Rio asked after her species.

“Sora used to be a human. After the Dragon King adopted Sora, she became a disciple.”

Now that they had spoken for a bit and introduced themselves, Sora seemed less nervous. Once she relaxed, she started referring to herself in third person—this was probably her natural state.

“Humans...can become the disciples of transcendent ones?” Rio asked, surprised.

“Sora did.”

“Disciples are the only ones who are unaffected by the forced memory erasure of using transcendent powers, right? Will turning someone into a

disciple bring back their forgotten memories?” What Rio was most curious about was whether there was a way for everyone to regain their memories.

“Sora hasn’t seen any precedents, so she doesn’t know. But it might be possible...?”

“Do you know how disciples are selected?”

“The Dragon King chooses who becomes his disciples. He says he can choose whom he wants as his disciples.”

“Did the Dragon King have other disciples, then?”

“No, Sora was his only disciple. He actually said that having many disciples was unfavorable.”

“Why is that?”

“Because god made a rule about it. A transcendent one is only allowed up to three disciples.”

“That god again, huh...” Rio sighed. It seemed like that god had a lot of apprehensions about the transcendent ones having contact with the world.

“Like the transcendent ones, disciples become removed from the laws of the world. As Sora said earlier, Sora’s mind and body stopped growing. Becoming a disciple also means that the words of the master are absolute. Any relations to family will also be cut off. That’s why one must choose their disciples carefully—is what the Dragon King said.”

“I see... Yeah, that makes sense. I agree with that. So how did the Dragon King end up choosing you, Sora?” Rio’s understanding of disciples had still been lacking. That’s why hearing things from another point of view helped him see the light. At the same time, he became curious as to how Sora ended up as the Dragon King’s disciple.

“Sora was born roughly one thousand and five hundred years ago. The Dragon King saved the dying Sora and made her into a disciple.”

“I see... That must have brought up bad memories. Sorry for asking.”

“Not at all! It’s all thanks to the Dragon King that Sora’s here now! Ask whatever you want to know!”

“In that case... Can you tell me how to make someone a disciple, and what kind of changes happen once you become one?”

From Sora’s explanation, Rio could make two more people into his disciples. While he wasn’t thinking of doing that to anyone right now, it was a matter that heavily concerned him—so it wouldn’t hurt to know more about it.

“The Dragon King said it’s done by sharing the transcendent one’s flesh or blood with someone. Sora drank his blood to become a disciple.”

“I-I see. Flesh or blood...”

“As for the changes that happen afterwards, disciples are heavily influenced by their transcendent master. Sora was also impacted by this. Watch...”

After saying that much, Sora suddenly got to her feet. Then, her seemingly ordinary human head and body grew horns and a tail.

“Huh...?”

Rio blinked and stared.

“Sora isn’t a human, but a dragonkin. On top of a physical body, Sora now has a spirit body too. This is what happens when Sora materializes part of that spirit body on top of the material body. Fully materializing the spirit body will result in becoming a dragon.” Disciples of the Dragon King gain the ability to transform into dragons. That was why he was the King of Dragons.

“She began emitting a strong aura, but it’s different from a spirit’s presence,” Aishia pointed out with wide eyes.

“It’s the special presence of an incarnated spirit body.”

“Does that mean the Dragon King could turn into a dragon as well?”

“That’s right. The main body of a human is the physical body. The main body of a spirit is their spirit body. But draconians use their physical body as their main body and spirit body as a secondary body. The Dragon King was a draconian, and so is his disciple.”

“I thought dragons existed in this world... I know demi-dragons do, at least.”

“A long time ago, the Dragon King gave his blessing to a certain species. That

species became the demi-dragons. But their main body is their physical body, and they can't turn into humanoid forms."

"What do you mean by blessing...?" Rio asked, unfamiliar with the new term.

"Hmm... It's different from creating a disciple, but the Dragon King can bestow his traits onto others—and the trait that he granted them is magic-resistant skin. Sora's dragon sections also become invulnerable to magic attacks when materialized. Oh, and elves, dwarves, and werebeasts received the blessing of the upper high rank spirits, so they have exceptionally high aptitude for spirit arts."

"Wow..." It was all fascinating information to Rio. "I have armor made of Black Wyvern leather, which means I killed the species that the past life of my past life blessed... Although it was done out of self-defense, it's a little..." However, his feelings about that were rather conflicted.

"Demi-dragons are capable of detecting the presence of the superior draconians, so it's impossible for them to attack the Dragon King on an instinctual level. But Sora couldn't detect the connection with the Dragon King until today either, so they probably attacked you unknowingly. Don't worry about it! They deserve the worst death possible for daring to attack the Dragon King." Sora dismissed his concerns ruthlessly, placing her respect for the Dragon King above all else.

"Th-That's a little extreme."

"The demi-dragon world is survival of the fittest. They've killed plenty of others in order to feed themselves, so they should be prepared for their own death when attacking another. There's no need for you to lose sleep over it, Dragon King. You're too kind."

Not wanting to see Rio so worried, Sora puffed up her cheeks to make her point firmly.

"Right, I guess that makes sense. I'll just have to accept it." He had no choice but to kill, so he killed. That was that.

"Back to the changes that happen after becoming a disciple. As you know already, the body and mind stop aging. But on top of that, disciples are

provided with a near-infinite supply of magic essence as long as their master's alive. They are bound to obey the orders of their master and can be forcefully summoned at their master's will. They will always know their master's location, and they can summon their master to them with their master's consent. Apart from that, all rules that apply to their master get applied to the disciple, so any memories the master forgets, the disciple will forget as well... And that's about it," Sora said, counting off each point on her hand as she went through.

"There's a lot of information to sort through there, but what do you mean by being bound to obey orders?"

"Orders that are given with the master's magic essence within them will have absolute control over the disciple's will. This is apparently a measure to ensure disciples don't go against the wills of the transcendent ones."

"That sounds rather dangerous... I'll have to be careful."

"The Dragon King from a thousand years ago also detested that power, so he never gave Sora any orders. Whenever he wanted something, he would say it like a request," Sora said, clearly pleased with how Rio's words just now had reminded her of the former Dragon King. It made Rio realize just how much she adored the Dragon King.

"I see... There's a lot more I want to ask, but the conversation has dragged on for a while. Are you tired?"

"Sora's fine!"

"Shall we chat a little more, then?"

Sora beamed, eager to talk more. "Gladly!"

"That being said, where should I even start..." Rio said, resuming the conversation. "Oh, that's right. I called you here kind of suddenly, but will you have any trouble returning to your original location? I was talking with Aishia and she mentioned disciples, so I tried summoning you on a whim... I'm sorry for causing you such inconvenience."

"No, it isn't an inconvenience at all!"

"Umm, we're in a place called the Galarc Kingdom right now—it's located in

the Strahl region. Where were you before?”

“The mountain range between the Wilderness and the Yagumo region.”

“That’s far... Well, it’d only take a second if you teleported, but do you have a teleport crystal on you?”

“Y-Yes, but... Is it better for Sora to leave...?” Sora looked up at Rio with the anxious eyes of a lost child.

“Of course, you’re more than welcome to stay...”

“Yes! Please! Sora wants to stay with the Dragon King! Sora’s waited a thousand years! A thousand years for the Dragon King to return! So please...!” Sora pleaded frantically, as though she had been told to leave.

“But if you’re going to stay here, you’ll probably need to prepare your belongings. I don’t mind if you return first to get them.”

“Sora prepared everything the moment she felt the Dragon King’s connection!”

“I-I see...”

With that, Rio had nothing left to say. Except...

“However, I’m not the Dragon King, okay? The Dragon King you knew is dead. I don’t have any memories of him, so I can’t act like the person you once knew. I may do things he would never do. I might end up making you sad because of that. Will you be prepared for that?” Rio asked firmly.

It seemed that Sora had a tendency to see him as the Dragon King of one thousand years ago. Rio had hesitated over saying such words so clearly, but in the end, he couldn’t act as someone he didn’t even know.

He might have been able to please her by attempting to act like the Dragon King, but creating a relationship in such a way felt too insincere. That was the kind of man Rio was, after all.

“Master Rio and Master Ryuo are indeed different people... But Sora was together with the Dragon King for hundreds of years, so she can tell. Even though the Dragon King died, even though he lost his memories... He’s still the Dragon King. The revived connection between us proves that,” Sora declared

with absolute certainty.

“You think so...?”

But Rio still seemed unsure. Would he be able to handle this utmost faith she directed towards him? He couldn't say for sure, which is why...

“There's one thing I'd like to ask—or rather, one thing I'd like to make clear from the beginning,” he said.

“Yes...?”

“I barely know anything about you. You don't know anything about my current self either. If you stay together with me, you may find that some of the things I do will deviate from your expectations.”

“W-Will Sora be annoying to have around?” Sora asked worriedly.

“That's not what I mean. I just want you to know that just because I'm the reincarnation of the Dragon King doesn't mean you have to obey me blindly. Your life belongs to you. Being a disciple doesn't mean you have to be restricted by a reincarnation. I don't want my existence to be your curse. If you ever have a change of heart, I want you to tell me without restraint. You should live how you wish.”

Rio conveyed the feelings in his heart directly to Sora.

I'd like you to live your life as you wish.

However, those words miraculously overlapped with the words Ryuo once said to Sora. And so, Sora's face crumpled. In the next moment, she burst into tears.

“W-Waaah...!”

Teardrops overflowed from her eyes, rolling down her cheeks like rain.

“H-Huh?” Rio was taken aback by the sudden breakdown. “Sorry, did I say something wrong?”

“N-No! That's not it! S-Sorry! Master Ryuo said the same thing a thousand years ago, so Sora just remembered that, and— Waaah!”

The dam on a thousand years of loneliness burst, and Sora began wailing like

a child.

“Haruto. No, Rio,” Aishia called. It was rare for her to call Rio by that name over Haruto.

Rio was a little surprised. “Yes?”

“Give Sora a hug and soothe her. This child has wished for that for the last thousand years.”

Rio nodded quietly. “Okay,” he said, then stood up and moved over to where Sora was seated across from him. He gently wrapped his arms around her.

“Dragon King... Waaah!”

Sora clung to him like a lost child who had finally found their parent, wailing even harder than before.

“I’m sorry, Sora. I was thinking too deeply into things,” he said, patting her back soothingly. “Will you live together with me?”

He lent his chest for her to cry on until her tears dried up.



Chapter 4: Plans for the Future

“Sora is terribly sorry for her behavior last night, Dragon King!”

The first thing the next morning, Sora bowed on the kitchen floor before Rio, who had been in the middle of preparing breakfast.

“Th-There there, Sora, it’s okay. Please raise your head. You haven’t done anything to apologize for, so you shouldn’t go kneeling in front of others so easily.”

Sora had fallen asleep crying last night, so the conversation had been placed on hold. She seemed to be apologizing about that, so Rio reassured her not to worry.

“N-No, Sora shouldn’t have behaved so disgracefully before the Dragon King...!” Sora stuttered, blushing up to her ears.

“You didn’t do anything disgraceful, though?” Rio objected, startled by her choice of words. He had no idea what she was referring to.

“But Sora wailed incessantly before asking to sleep with the Dragon King! Sora was a terrible person who took advantage of the Dragon King’s kindness!”

Sora’s gaze was fixed on the floor, willing it to open up and swallow her whole.

“You just asked to sleep in the same room! In different beds!” Rio corrected in a fluster. “Please choose your words carefully... You could cause misunderstandings like that.”

He didn’t want to imagine what would have happened if Latifa and the others had been here. Thankfully, no one was in the house other than Aishia.

“For now, please stand up. Here,” Rio said, offering Sora a hand.

“...” Sora stubbornly refused to look up.

“Breakfast will be ready soon.”

“S-Sora can go without breakfast!” Sora said, insisting on punishing herself.

“But I made your share already...”

“Huh? R-Really?”

“It’d be such a waste if you didn’t eat it...” Rio added gently, like he was talking to a small child.

“B-But Sora needs to be punished...”

Sora’s heart wavered. She was hungry. She wanted breakfast. It had been a thousand years since her last breakfast with the Dragon King. And it was his homemade cooking! There was nothing more she could ask for. But did she really deserve to receive such a reward? No, she did not. Yet she couldn’t trouble the Dragon King either. And so...

“I-Is it okay for Sora to eat breakfast too? Together with the Dragon King...” she asked nervously, finally settling on her answer.

“I never said you couldn’t. Let’s forget about yesterday and enjoy the food. Come on.”

“O-Okay!”

This time, Sora accepted Rio’s hand and stood up.

“Can you wake Aishia up for me? We can all eat together.”

“Understood!” Sora replied with a salute, then rushed out of the kitchen.

She’s so energetic for the morning.

Rio chuckled as he watched her leave.



“That was so tasty...”

After breakfast, Sora sat back in her seat in satisfaction. She had praised Rio’s cooking the entire meal, so it was evident just how much she enjoyed it.

Neither Aishia nor Rio was the chatty type while eating. They had told Sora to eat as much as she wanted, then focused on their own food for most of breakfast.

“Are you full now?”

“Yes! Breakfast with the Dragon King after one thousand years was delicious! And it was homemade!”

In fact, it had been a thousand years since Sora last ate with anyone at all. That was something Rio realized after the events of last night.

“I see... I’m glad to hear that.”

“You’re really good at cooking, Dragon King!”

“Thank you. Are you any good at cooking, Sora?”

“S-Sora is good at grilling!”

Sora was an honest child. The way her voice cracked implied she clearly wasn’t as good as she claimed.

“Erm, what do you normally eat?”

“Meat!”

“Do you get enough nutrition from just eating meat? What about vegetables?”

Sora averted her gaze awkwardly. “S-Sora can’t get sick, so...”

“Does the immortality of disciples include immunity from disease?” Rio asked with a sigh.

“The degree of a disciple’s immortality depends on their transcendent master. The Dragon King gave Sora an especially strong immortal body,” Sora said proudly.

“Did the Dragon King make you eat nothing but meat a thousand years ago?”

“H-He did say Sora should eat more vegetables...”

“In that case, you should eat your vegetables properly. Oh, but you did eat the vegetables for breakfast fine.” Rio looked at her empty plate.

“That’s because the Dragon King’s cooking was delicious! Especially the yellow vegetable—it was sweet like candy!”

“That was the boiled pumpkin. Have you ever had it before?”

“No, it was Sora’s first time seeing a vegetable like that!”

Sora must have had a really unbalanced diet if she had never seen a pumpkin before. That, or pumpkins weren’t harvested outside of the Strahl region and the spirit folk village.

“I see. If you liked it, I’ll make it again sometime.”

When he saw how innocent Sora looked, Rio was unable to scold her too harshly. Instead, he quietly promised himself he would focus on making a more balanced diet for Sora in the future.

“Thank you very much!” Sora grinned.

“Right. Now that we’re done eating, let’s talk about the future. But before that, I’d like to ask a few more questions about the past. Is that okay?” Rio said, looking between Aishia and Sora.

“Yup.”

“Of course!”

The two replied at the same time.

“There was something the Wise God Lina wanted to accomplish,” Rio began. “That’s why she made the Dragon King’s soul reincarnate into my body. She then reincarnated her own soul into Miharuru. Do I have things right so far, Aishia?”

“Yup.”

“What was it that she wanted to accomplish? One of our goals for the near future will be to determine that.”

“W-Wait a moment!” Sora interrupted, clearly startled.

“Yes...?” Rio replied. He seemed to have no idea why Sora reacted so strongly.

“That woman... Lina reincarnated as well?!”

“Yes, according to Aishia. She’s reincarnated into a girl called Ayase Miharuru.”

“Then why can’t you ask her directly?” Sora wondered.

Of course, it wasn’t that simple.

“Well, it would be easy if that were possible. Like me, Miharu has no memories of being a transcendent one.”

“Oh no... How dare she live a carefree life while dragging the Dragon King into such a mess!” Sora growled.

“It’s not her fault—those were the rules the god created.”

Those who were considered residents of this world would lose their memories if they left for another world, be it through reincarnation or otherwise. However, those who came to this world from outside would retain their memories. That was what Aishia had explained last night.

“But she’s the one that dragged you into this terrible mess! That Ayase Miharu has to know something!” Sora whined unhappily.

“What do you think, Aishia?”

“I’m not sure... Miharu doesn’t have any memories right now. And she cannot become a transcendent one anymore.”

“Why is that?”

“Only those with divinity can use transcendent powers without consequence. However, the only people with divinity are the transcendent ones. And Lina’s divinity was passed onto me, not Miharu.”

“And that means...”

“Lina lost her divinity and reincarnated into a regular human. That’s why Miharu cannot regain her transcendent powers like you. She’s just a normal girl with a little more magic essence than others. It’ll be hard for her to accomplish anything.”

“If you’ve inherited Lina’s divinity, does that mean you can use Lina’s transcendent powers, Aishia?”

“The powers itself are carved into the transcendent one’s soul. Lina’s soul is within Miharu, so there’s no way for me to use it.”

“In that case, will Miharu be able to use transcendent powers if you return Lina’s divinity to her?”

“It might be possible... But I don’t know how to do that.”

“And there’s no way Miharu would know without her memories, right?”

What they needed right now was to organize all the facts. At present, the one with the least information was Rio. He had received a general summary of things yesterday, but he wanted to ask for more details today.

“But even if I could return Lina’s divinity to Miharu, there’s no way for her to use the transcendent powers without any risks.”

“Can’t you just assimilate with her? She can make a spirit bond with you.”

“She can’t—the spirit bond can only be done with one person. She’d need to find another spirit to bond with, but I don’t know anything about the sorcery required to make a bond. Miharu would need to recall her memories to make a bond.”

“I see... But why did Lina transfer her divinity to you in the first place? I reincarnated with the Dragon King’s divinity, so I could use the Dragon King’s transcendent powers, right?”

“She probably wanted to reduce the burden of using your powers. Divinity reduces the burden of using transcendent powers, but that burden is still great even when reduced. By assimilating with me, you can receive twice the benefits of divinity.”

“So if I hadn’t assimilated with you, I wouldn’t have died, but the aftermath of using the transcendent powers would have been even worse?”

“That is correct.”

“So it’d be natural to assume Lina wanted the Dragon King to use his powers.”

“That seems to be the case.”

“I see... But that raises a new question,” Rio pondered, placing a hand under his chin.

“What is it?”

“Did Lina expect something to happen in this era, one thousand years after the Divine War ended? She reincarnated the Dragon King for a reason, right?”

And with the full intention of having him use his powers.”

There was normally no way for one to know what would happen one thousand years in the future. Even if she had a reason for her prediction, a thousand years was just too long of a time to be reasonable.

“Lina had the power to see the future. It was her transcendent power as the Wise God Lina. She used it to find out what would happen in a thousand years.”

However, it seemed that the Wise God Lina had the power to overturn Rio’s sense of reason.

“The power to see into the future...by a thousand years? That’s incredible,” Rio said with a strained smile. He thought he had seen it all by now—and he was proved wrong.

“Whatever Lina saw with her powers wasn’t transferred to me with her memories. I can’t recall anything about it.”

“I see... There’s no way of knowing what memories were copied or not.”

“Honestly! That woman is plain trouble!”

Rio and Sora both expressed contrasting reactions to Aishia, with Rio tilting his head in thought while Sora raged across from him.

“I’m sorry,” Aishia apologized. “The Dragon King was weakened beyond treatment by the point Lina was copying her memories to me. She couldn’t spend enough time on the process.”

“We’ve learned a lot just from the portion that she managed to copy, so it’s fine. We were also able to meet Sora thanks to that. Right?”

“W-Well, Sora can commend her for that much,” Sora muttered shyly.

“I wonder if Lina knew everything... Did she know that the Dragon King would become Amakawa Haruto then, Rio? Did she know what kind of life I would live, and what future I would arrive at? Has everything gone exactly as she planned?”

Rio smiled gently at Sora.

The former Dragon King and Wise God had reincarnated into childhood friends Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharuru, then Haruto had gone on to reincarnate again in this world as Rio while Miharuru was dragged into a hero summoning.

Their reunion in this world had been quite the dramatic scene, but it begged the question of how much Lina had foreseen with her powers. Did she know what kind of life they would have after reincarnating? Could she intervene with fate and manipulate it to her liking? That was the thought that occurred to Rio.

“That’s why Sora doesn’t like her. From the Divine War up until this point, it feels like she got the Dragon King involved while knowing what would happen,” Sora muttered, pouting unhappily.

“The actions of a single person can cause the future to branch infinitely. That was how Lina used her powers to intervene with fate and change the future multiple times,” Aishia said, backing Rio’s question. “However, it isn’t that easy to change the future. The future holds an infinite number of possibilities. Trying to learn every possibility is too much of a burden for the brain—even when that brain belongs to a Wise God. That’s why the future Lina used her powers to read was always limited to the most probable future at that point in time. The future is capable of changing, but there are some futures that can’t be changed no matter what. There are also some futures that can only be changed for the worse.”

She spoke as though she was denying Rio’s question.

“What does that mean?” Sora asked impatiently.

“Designating the reincarnation destination should have been possible. Reincarnating into Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharuru was something Lina intentionally chose. Haruto’s reincarnation into Rio was also calculated. However...”

Aishia paused, staring closely at Rio.

“Just because Lina purposefully moved the Dragon King’s soul from Haruto to Rio doesn’t mean that the Dragon King can control you. Whether it was as Amakawa Haruto or as Rio, you have always been the one in control of your decisions. There’s also the possibility that our current present isn’t the future

that Lina foresaw.”

“Right... That makes sense. There’s nothing to say that everything was inevitable. I guess it isn’t good to get too wrapped up in the unknown future.”

“You might learn something if the Dragon King or Lina’s memories return...” Sora added with a vexed look.

“Yeah, maybe. That would be the fastest way of gaining information, if it was possible.”

Both Rio and Miharuru had lost their memories of being transcendent ones. Their memories had been wiped when they first left this world for another dimension. At present, their only hint was Aishia, who retained her memories despite leaving for the other dimension together with the Dragon King.

“Do you still have no idea how you regained your memories of a thousand years ago, Aishia?”

“Nope...”

“In that case, we have no choice but to search for a means of regaining our memories ourselves. Do you have any ideas, Sora? Are there any places where Lina may have left a hint?” Rio asked Sora. Perhaps there’d be some clues left behind in her past bases. It was the first idea that had come to mind.

“The Seven Wise Gods all had bases for their research. Lina was banished by the other Wise Gods, so she conducted her research from a house she carried around with space sorcery like this. She continued researching from there even when she was moving around with the Dragon King.”

“A portable base, hmm. That’ll be hard to find... There’s no way of finding something stored using space sorcery.”

Even if it was set down somewhere and left behind, it would have been hidden with extremely advanced sorcery. Searching the continent for a base like that would be like searching for a small gem in the desert.

“The final battle of the Divine War took place on the west end of Strahl. Perhaps if you searched around there...”

“Being able to narrow it down to a certain region is extremely helpful. Thank

you. Let's pay a visit to the countries there sometime in the near future."

"Okay!" Sora replied enthusiastically, pleased that Rio had praised her.

"Then let's organize our goals for the future. First, we want to know what Lina wanted the Dragon King to accomplish with his reincarnation. In order to find that out, we're going to look for any clues Lina may have left behind. If there are any other events from a thousand years ago that neither of you know about, we'll investigate that too. Can you think of anything?"

"What will you do about Lina's reincarnation, Ayase Miharuru?" Sora asked.

"There's no point in talking to her when she doesn't have Lina's memories. She isn't a transcendent one either, so she's forgotten about me and Aishia. I don't want to risk any rules activating by carelessly approaching her, so let's leave her alone for now. I'd like to continue keeping an eye on her in case there are any changes, though..."

Even if he didn't use his transcendent powers, he wasn't allowed to support the interest of any individual or group. Transcendent ones had to act in the interests of everyone. Breaking that rule would erase his memories.

If Rio joined up with Miharuru and the others now, the world could perceive him as a transcendent one acting in their interest—and if that happened, he would lose his memories of them. While the chance of this happening from a single interaction was low, Rio didn't want to risk it at this stage.

"In that case, do you want Sora to investigate that? It's the duty of a disciple to interact with the common people on behalf of the transcendent one."

"Hmm... Let's wait and see a bit longer first, okay?" Rio said weakly, his eyes darting about nervously.

It's not that I don't trust Sora, but...

If Sora was to make formal contact with Miharuru, she'd have to go through the process of getting permission from the Galarc Kingdom. Avoiding that meant making contact secretly, and Rio still didn't know how capable she was of acting stealthily.

Even if she could slip through the kingdom's security without a hitch, it was

possible that Miharū and the others would find her suspicious. She needed to have the ability to gain their trust and communicate with them harmoniously. Since they had just met each other, Rio still had no idea what kind of abilities Sora had.

“I might ask you to do so one day, so please wait until then.”

Sora nodded eagerly. “Got it!”

“Do you have anything to add, Aishia?”

“The disciples of the other transcendent ones might know something too.”

“Oh, that’s right. Disciples become immortal, so they should still be alive, right? Do you know of any other disciples, Sora?” Rio asked.

“Unfortunately, Sora doesn’t know where they are...”

“Have you ever met them before?”

“Sora’s met a disciple of an upper high rank spirit, and a disciple of Lina’s before.”

“What kind of person is Lina’s disciple?”

“One is a homunculus sorcerer, and the other two are golems.”

“A homunculus...and two golems?” Rio was taken aback by the unexpected answer.

“Both were created as a result of the Seven Wise Gods’ research. The homunculus was an unworldly being created by taking the good parts of every other species. Becoming a disciple of the Wise God Lina gave them the trait of incredible intelligence. So they served as Lina’s assistant.”

“What about the golems?”

“They’re magic artifacts that specialized in offensive combat. They had artificial personalities implanted into them.”

“If they’ve got personalities, does that mean they can communicate?”

“Hmm. They can’t move without a supply of magic essence, and they’re only capable of following orders. The homunculus would be better to communicate with. But they all went to the final battle with Lina, so there’s no guarantee they

made it out alive.”

“Can disciples die even after they become immortal...?”

“Yes. They’re immortal, not invincible. A fatal blow will kill us, and relieving us of our roles as disciples will kill us by returning our natural lifespan to us.”

“What kind of disciples did the upper high rank spirits have, then?”

“They were all high rank humanoid spirits. Including the ones Sora didn’t meet.”

“It was probably easier to obey their own kind, I guess. So that means we’ll have to look for humanoid spirits too.”

As a fellow spirit, Aishia would be able to detect their presences even if they were materialized, and Sora seemed capable of detecting spirit presences too. Humanoid spirits were extremely rare, but it was a better shot than searching for clues Lina may or may not have left behind.

“However, all the disciples went to the Divine War with their upper high rank masters. It’s possible they were defeated along with them.”

“I see, that does sound plausible...”

If they went to the Divine War with the upper high rank spirits, they probably attempted to save their masters when they were sealed. There had been no news of them for the past thousand years, so it was most likely they were all defeated as well.

“Want to ask Dryas?” Aishia suggested.

The only other humanoid spirit they knew was Dryas. She wasn’t a humanoid spirit during the era of the Divine War, but she could have an idea of where to find others.

“Good idea. Dryas would have lost her memories of us since she isn’t a disciple, but we can attempt to make contact sometime.”

“Yeah.”

Even if she had lost her memories, the village where she was located was basically a holy land for spirits. Aishia would probably be welcomed without an

issue, although she would need to wear a mask. It was also something Sora might be able to do.

“Next is whether to release the spirit bond seal between the heroes and upper high rank spirits, if we can figure out how. What do you think, Aishia?”

“If we release the seal, they may seek revenge on Miharu. As long as that danger can be prevented, I think it’s better to release them.”

“Right. I agree.”

First and foremost, the upper high rank spirits were victims. They were deceived by the Six Wise Gods and forcefully integrated into the hero-summoning system. As long as there was no risk of violence, it was only right to release them.

“However, the spirit bond system is extremely complex. Releasing the seal would require the intelligence of one of the Seven Wise Gods. It’d be impossible for us.”

“In that case, we can search for a means of releasing the seal along with our search for Lina’s aim. We can also come up with a way to clear up the misunderstanding regarding Lina while we do that.”

“I agree with that.”

“From the sound of the conversation... Do you two know where the upper high rank spirits are already?” Sora asked, looking between Rio and Aishia curiously.

“Right, you still don’t know about that—yes, we do. They’ve been sealed in an assimilated form with the heroes... Do you know what heroes are, Sora?”

“Heroes...?”

Apparently she didn’t. Sora had been protecting the Yagumo region at the request of the Dragon King, so she was estranged from the events that had happened in Strahl.

“To put it simply, the Six Wise Gods sealed the upper high rank spirits in the hero-summoning system in order to use their powers. Those who are chosen as heroes are assimilated with the spirits and become capable of bringing out their

powers.”

“Oh...”

“The upper high rank spirits resent the Six Wise Gods for sealing them. They believe Lina was in on the scheme to seal them and resent her too. The heroes are unaware that they’ve been assimilated with upper high rank spirits, and the seal protects them from most of the danger—but if the seal weakens, the heroes are in danger of being possessed by the spirits.”

“Th-That sounds like a problem...”

“We were actually fighting a hero that had been taken over by an upper high rank spirit just yesterday, right before I summoned you.”

“What?!”

“Honestly, it wasn’t a fight I could have won. If Aishia hadn’t regained her memories and helped me use the Dragon King’s transcendent powers, we would have lost.”

“At least you won in the end!”

“It was during that fight that we realized the upper high rank spirits could tell that Miharuru is Lina. They also saw me as the Dragon King, but they didn’t seem to notice that we were both reincarnated.”

“The upper high rank spirits have special eyes that allow them to see a person’s soul. It works like how a regular spirit can detect spiritual presences, except they can gain even more information from it,” Sora explained.

In that case, there was no way they would mistake the soul of a fellow transcendent one that had governed the world with them for so long.

“Is that the transcendent power of the upper high rank spirits?”

“No. They were the ultimate spiritual beings; their eyes were more of a trait of being a transcendent one. Just like how the Seven Wise Gods had incredible intelligence.”

“So the Seven Wise Gods were actually wise.”

“Well, they were called the Wise Gods for a reason. The Dragon King wasn’t

able to understand all of Lina's research either. Then they had their transcendent powers on top of that..."

Sora snorted grumpily. She didn't seem to have a favorable impression of the Seven Wise Gods for dragging the Dragon King into the war.

"Ha ha... Did the Dragon King have some kind of trait as well?"

"The Dragon King's trait was the ultimate physical body!" Sora replied, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"Dragons do give the image of being extremely strong."

"Do you remember how Sora showed you her dragonkin form yesterday? When the Dragon King materializes his dragon body, he gains the strongest armor in the world. In that form, he becomes capable of deflecting all spirit arts and magic."

According to Sora, their physical humanoid forms were their main bodies, but they also had a dragon spirit body that they could materialize to become dragonkins. That applied to both the Dragon King and his disciple Sora. However...

"That's impressive... But I'm a human now, so I don't have a dragon spirit form, right?" Rio asked nervously.

"Indeed... Sora can't sense any spirit presence at all from the Dragon King..."

"Neither can I," Aishia added.

If Aishia couldn't sense anything from Rio at this distance, then it was almost certain that he didn't have a spirit form.

"That was the proof of the Dragon King's connection with Sora, as the only two dragonkins in this world..." It seemed like Sora was in a greater state of shock than Rio. She hung her head sadly.

"W-Well, there's no knowing what will happen in the future, and we'll make lots of memories from here on! Come to think of it, what did you say the transcendent powers of the upper high rank spirits were?" Rio asked, distracting Sora by changing the topic.

"The powers of the spirits are..."

“S-Sora can explain!”

With her role in danger of being stolen by Aishia, Sora snapped back to her senses.

“Thank you, Sora. Could you explain it to me?”

“Yes! The transcendent power the upper high rank spirits have is to ignore the laws of nature in order to create nature. God gave them that power in order to protect the balance between mankind and nature,” Sora answered.

“The power...to create nature?” Rio couldn’t quite process her words.

“Yup! Spirit arts create phenomena based on the caster’s imagination. The power of the upper high rank spirits does something similar, but at a greater scale—they’re able to instantly shape the natural world according to their imagination. Each one is limited to a single specialty element, though.”

“So that’s what we saw in the fight yesterday...”

The details Sora provided helped Rio finally understand the tremendous power of the upper high rank spirit he saw yesterday. He recalled the image of the ground splitting apart and rising like a tsunami that flipped the earth.

“The Dragon King once said that the six upper high rank spirits could recreate the world if they used their powers all together.”

“And if they use their powers for destruction, they can cause natural disasters like the earth spirit that possessed Erica yesterday,” Aishia added.

“Right. If mankind ever neglects nature, it is the duty of the upper high rank spirits to create natural disasters and punish them. That was what the Dragon King told Sora.”

“I see... Thank you, I get it now.”

“Not at all! Sora can also explain the powers of the Seven Wise Gods if you wish!”

“Wasn’t the power of the Seven Wise Gods to see the future?” Rio asked, tilting his head in confusion.

“Yes, but that’s just Lina’s power. The other six had different powers.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. They were really secretive about it, so neither the Dragon King nor Lina knew how their powers worked in detail.”

It seemed that the Seven Wise Gods each had a unique transcendent power.

“In that case, can you tell me what you know?”

“Of course! If Sora recalls correctly... There’s duplication, component analysis, manipulation of fate... Umm...and...err... Lina’s future sight...and...”

Sora had started her list with confidence, but started trailing off towards the middle and began to panic. She had either forgotten the rest, or she never had a clear memory to begin with.

“Did you forget?” Rio guessed. He had specifically asked for the powers of the Six Wise Gods, yet she had given him the answer for Lina, who should have been excluded. It was clear she had forgotten.

“I-It’s all Lina’s fault! She used really difficult words one after another!”

“It’s all right, it’s been a thousand years since then, so it’s only natural to forget. Do you remember anything, Aishia?”

“I’m sorry, I only know about Lina’s power.”

“Hee hee hee. It’s Sora’s win!” Sora said, then let out a sigh of relief.

“All I know is that the Seven Wise Gods have extreme intelligence, and when their minds are combined with their powers, they can do pretty much anything. They have the knowledge and ability to find whatever they want to know.”

“R-Right. The god gave them their powers to lead mankind. The Seven Wise Gods were meant to become figures of worship, symbols for mankind to believe in,” Sora added, not wanting to lose to Aishia.

“So the role of the upper high rank spirits was to maintain the balance between nature and mankind, and the role of the Seven Wise Gods was to become a symbol of faith for mankind. And god gave them all tremendous powers for those roles...” Rio summarized. He was starting to get a good idea of what a transcendent one really was.

“Don’t be silly! The Dragon King’s power is WAY more impressive than any of the other transcendent powers!”

“Then can you tell me about the Dragon King’s power as well? My understanding is that it releases a light that erases the target...”

He had obtained the power in the midst of battle—along with a vague understanding of how to use it—but he still hadn’t received a proper explanation of what kind of power it was.

“The power that the Dragon King possesses is annihilation. It was bestowed upon him for the purpose of eliminating any threats to the world, in order to protect the world,” Sora said proudly.

I erased the calamity that the earth spirit created in the battle yesterday. It is indeed a fearsome power. But I have no idea what I erased and what I didn’t, even though I was the one who used the power. What if I accidentally erase everything?

Rio stared at his hands as a chill went down his spine. This power was dangerous—that was what his instincts were telling him.

“Honestly, the Dragon King is the strongest! There’s no one out there who can face the Dragon King in a head-on fight!” Sora’s words were filled with passion.

“You really think so? It sounds like the other transcendent ones were rather dangerous as well.”

“It’s true! If the transcendent ones were to use their powers on each other, the Dragon King’s annihilation would always come out on top!”

Rio paused for a brief moment. “I see...”

What was bothering him was the fact he still didn’t know how to use the power well, and the fact that not every fight was held head-to-head. Surprise attacks were always a possibility, and he would be helpless against something that couldn’t be annihilated.

Lina had made the Dragon King reincarnate into the present, but was it possible for someone more powerful to appear in the future? Would Rio be able to protect the ones he loved if that happened, or would he be stopped by

the rules the god created? All those fears weighed down on him, and it showed on his face.

“Is something the matter, Dragon King?” Sora asked worriedly.

“No, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about how I have to use this power to protect you as well, Sora,” Rio replied, smiling at Sora gently.

“You don’t need to worry about that! As the Dragon King’s disciple, Sora is *very* strong!”

Sora puffed her chest up proudly, chuckling to herself.

“Is that so? I mean, I’m sure that must be true, but...”

A disciple was almost certainly strong, but Sora looked no different from a small child. The clumsiness she occasionally showed only enhanced that impression further, so Rio couldn’t help but have some doubts.

“S-Sora is strong! Much stronger than Aishia over there!” Sora insisted, pointing a finger at Aishia.

“Stronger than Aishia... I’d like to see that strength in person someday, then.”

Rio knew just how strong Aishia was, and she wouldn’t lose in a fight so easily. But he had a feeling that arguing here would only cause trouble, so he decided to set the matter aside for another day.

“U-Understood!”

But that wasn’t conveyed clearly.

“Sora will demonstrate her true ability!” She puffed up her soft cheeks in a pout, ready to defend her pride.



A bit over ten minutes later, the group had moved to an uninhabited wasteland tens of kilometers away from the capital of Duke Gregory’s territory. Their goal was to hold a mock battle between Sora and Aishia.

When Aishia materialized to fight, her spirit presence was revealed to the surroundings. The same happened to Sora when she materialized her dragon body. They considered using masks to hide their presence, but they didn’t want

to risk the precious masks breaking for a friendly match.

That's why they had decided to travel far away from the city to avoid detection. It was still relatively nearby, so they could return in a matter of minutes if needed.

Right now, Sora and Aishia were standing at a distance of ten meters from each other. Rio stood between them as the umpire.

"Umm... There's a chance that Aishia's considered a transcendent one after assimilating with me. Will using her powers in a match like this cause any problems?" Rio asked. He still seemed rather hesitant about the idea.

"Sora is the Dragon King's disciple! Matches without any interests at stake aren't a problem!"

"Got it... There's no need to go all out, so don't take it too far. That's all."

Pressured by Sora's enthusiasm, Rio finally readied himself. He needed to know Sora's abilities sooner or later anyway. Aishia seemed to feel the same, since she had agreed to Sora's challenge and brought Rio here.

Sora, who clearly saw Aishia as a rival, was pumped up for the match. "Hee hee hee. This is the perfect opportunity. Let's make it clear which one of us is more worthy of being the Dragon King's right-hand man!"

Rio picked up a small stone from the ground, then explained the rules. "Okay. I'm going to throw this stone, and the match will begin when it hits the ground. Please refrain from using any attacks that could cause major damage to the surroundings. And you must stop when I tell you to. Is that clear?"

"Clear as day!"

"Yup."

After seeing them nod, Rio threw the stone upwards. "All right, go."

At the exact moment the stone landed, Sora moved.

"Haaah!"

She's fast.

Rio's eyes widened. Sora charged straight at Aishia the moment the stone fell,

but...

“...”

Aishia leaped backwards without a twitch of the brow, evading her easily. As soon as she did that, dragon wings sprouted from Sora’s back.

“You won’t get away!”

Sora flew after Aishia. Her speed was even faster after growing wings, allowing her to close in on Aishia’s retreat midair.

There, the two engaged in combat. However, it wasn’t exactly a close-combat match.

After all, the two were extremely fast. They could fly around freely. They could fly from one place to the next without pause, and could cover a distance of a hundred meters in the blink of an eye—meaning a distance of two or three hundred meters was barely any distance at all. They never stopped in a single place for very long, so their fight spanned a huge area.

The two started to move with right-angle turns that would be too much of a burden for a regular human body to pull off, even after physical enhancement. Their movements were impossible for an ordinary person to follow.

Thus, the fierce exchange of midair blows continued for some time.

“Wow...”

Rio was shocked. By now, he had seen enough to know that Sora had plenty of strength. If there was one thing he was yet to see, then it’d be how Sora dealt with an opponent that cast multiple spirit arts from a long distance. Of course, with her mobility, nothing was actually long distance...

Just then, Aishia froze in the air. Copying her movements, Sora came to a stop ten meters away.

“Tch. You just won’t stay still,” Sora muttered in annoyance.

“You’re fast too.”

Pleased by Aishia’s compliment, Sora attempted to praise her in return. “H-Hmph! You’re just a little better than Sora thought.”

“Haruto should know how strong you are by now,” Aishia said, looking down at Rio, who was watching them from the ground.

“Hmph... Sora’s much stronger than this.”

“I think Haruto wants to know how well you can defend against essence attacks in your dragonkin form,” Aishia said, casting dozens of magic essence bullets around her. She was basically telling her to take her attack as a demonstration for Rio.

“Oh, is that what this is...”

Sora glanced down at Rio as well. Indeed, she had only been flying around with her wings out in high-speed hand-to-hand combat until now. She was yet to show her dragon form’s essence-repelling ability. She didn’t like the way she was being asked to do it, but...

“Very well.” Sora accepted Aishia’s proposal.

“However! Sora has no intention of letting you hit her with any old attack. If you want to see Sora’s defenses, you’ll have to stop her close-combat attempts and hit her first. Since Sora will be using her dragonkin form, she will subdue you without using long-ranged attacks!” Sora declared, pointing her finger at Aishia sternly. At the same time, horns grew out of her head and a tail sprouted from her rear; her arms also transformed into dragon arms.

“Then I’ll run away from your close-ranged attacks while attacking from afar. If you can get close enough to touch me, it will be your victory.”

“You’re on!”

Thus, they settled on the rules for their match.

“Okay. Ready?”

“Whenever you are!”

The match resumed. Aishia silently fired a barrage of light bullets at Sora while she flew backwards.

“Too slow!” Sora made use of her small frame to weave through the barrage cleanly. She began her pursuit of Aishia, who was already casting a second round to block Sora’s approach.

I see... It was a completely different scene from the pure close combat exchange earlier, and Rio could guess what they were aiming for.

In short, it was a game of tag. Sora was the one chasing, and Aishia was the one fleeing. Aishia was attacking with long ranged spirit arts, while Sora limited herself to close-ranged attacks. He figured they had decided those rules when the battle paused just now. Aishia continuously fired her barrage of light bullets directly at Sora.

“Using the same attack over and over will have no effect on Sora!”

Sora darted in a zigzag pattern between the bullets while charging straight for Aishia. The rain of bullets failed to make any impact on her.

However, Aishia hadn’t been casting her bullet barrage for no reason. Just as Sora’s eyes grew used to the sight of the bullets, Aishia started manipulating the trajectory of the shots.

“Wha?!”

The bullets that had only moved in straight lines until now suddenly started making unexpected twists and turns towards Sora.

“Guh!” Even Sora couldn’t help but react late. But her reflexes were fast enough to allow her body to twist in a barrel roll that forcefully allowed her to avoid the shots.

“H-Hmph! You’re still too slow!” Sora boasted smugly, despite the clear panic on her face. “Did you think Sora could—?!”

Her boasting was interrupted midsentence by an even greater surprise. The bullets that should have shot past her doubled back like a boomerang, surrounding her from every direction. Each bullet was locked onto her like they were tracking her every movement.

I-Is she manually controlling every one of these bullets?!

Sora came to the realization that Aishia’s spirit art technique was far better than she had imagined. And that meant it would be a real challenge to evade this...

“Argh! Take that!” Sora started releasing magic essence to enhance her

physical body even more. She then stopped moving forward and started spinning on the spot with her wings spread, deflecting the shots with the momentum of her spin.

If she's choosing this method of blocking the attacks, does that mean she isn't able to neutralize the kinetic energy of the essence bullets? Rio looked up at Sora with widened eyes and analyzed her movements.

"Y-You've done it now, Aishia."

"You okay?"

"Of course!"

"Want to keep going?"

"Yes! Listen up. From here on, it's a head-to-head contest! Sora's going to crush you with all she's got, so no more sneaky tricks!"

"Can I use elemental arts?"

"If you want. Sora can take on every element there is!"

"Then..." Aishia summoned giant orbs that were several meters in diameter—five were lightning, five were water, and five were fire.

Does she have no particular element she specializes in? Guess she's not the humanoid spirit created by Lina for nothing. Sora reevaluated Aishia's abilities with a sharp look.

"Go on, attack Sora all you want!" she urged loudly, pointing a finger at Aishia. She seemed extremely confident in herself.

"Okay." Aishia fired one of the water orbs at Sora. The orb, which was over ten times the size of the light bullets from earlier, shot at Sora at a supersonic speed, but...

"Hmph!"

Sora didn't budge from her position, swinging her dragonkin right arm that was wrapped with magic essence. The resulting shock wave burst the water orb into a spray of harmless droplets.

That's quite an impressive amount of power. Sora smiled down at the sight of

Rio's surprise, then turned back to taunt Aishia. "Keep the attacks coming! Sora will demonstrate exactly what powers the Dragon King bestowed upon her!"

In response, Aishia began firing one orb after another. "Here goes!"

Sora shot forward like an arrow released from a bowstring pulled all the way back, accelerating towards the elemental attacks herself.

The swing of her dragonkin arm at that speed was like the embodiment of absurdity. Whether the orb was water, fire, or lightning, her sharp claws tore them apart equally.

Elemental orbs cast in advance were no match for Sora—this was what Aishia realized immediately. She needed a more powerful attack to strike Sora down in one go. However, such an attack would potentially reduce a regular human body to dust.

"..."

Aishia hesitated. But she had no time to think. Figuring Sora was strong enough to survive, she held out her hand and readied her essence.

"That's the last one over here!"

Sora noticed that Aishia was preparing another attack just as she was slashing down the last orb and called out to her. "Now, come!"

Aishia fired an extra-large essence cannon at Sora to stop her approach. The beam of light was thick enough to swallow Sora entirely.

"Haaah!" Sora stuck her right arm out as she flew straight at the cannon fire. Just as she was about to make contact with the beam, she sank into it like tofu and pierced through it.

"Seriously...?" Rio mumbled in spite of himself.

"Now, it's over with *this*!" Sora quashed every attack smoothly and reached Aishia. But just as she was about to touch her body, Aishia rapidly retreated.

"Wha?!" Sora yelped in shock. She believed she had won, so this came to her as a surprise. She quickly snapped back to her senses and chased after Aishia.

"H-Hey! Don't run! Aishia! It was Sora's victory just now!"

“This wasn’t in the rules.”

Sora couldn’t argue against that. “Grr. L-Listen up! Sora would have caught you easily if she could use long-ranged attacks, and she still hasn’t shown you her full dragonkin form!” she argued out of frustration.

“I still have my assimilated form with Haruto too,” Aishia said, slowing down to reply.

“H-Hey, that’s unfair! Actually, that’s been bothering Sora this entire time— why do you call the Dragon King by the name Haruto?! The way you make it sound like you’re special to him makes Sora so envio— No, it’s just so disrespectful!” Sora started wailing.

Rio stared up at the two of them with an amused smile. *Well, I guess this means we have another reliable ally.*

He rose into the sky to inform them of their tie.



Chapter 5: In the Galarc Kingdom

Three days had passed since the battle with Erica. Everyone that had gone to Duke Gregory's territory had now returned to the capital of the Galarc Kingdom.

It was the afternoon, and King Francois had been invited by Charlotte into the mansion that had formerly been bestowed upon Rio. The purpose of his visit was to discuss things with Satsuki, Celia, and the others gathered in the dining room.

Besides Francois and Charlotte, the others in attendance were Satsuki, Miharuru, Celia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Gouki, and Kayoko. Liselotte had also been invited, as well as Masato and Lilianna.

Leading the gathering was Charlotte.

"Ever since we've returned to the capital, I have been investigating the strange sense of loss and discomfort that has been plaguing all of us," she said. "As a result, I've found things that provide answers, and things that raise more questions. Today, I'd like to discuss these things with everyone and hear your thoughts, which is why I've invited Father and arranged this meeting."

"Excuse me." First Princess Lilianna of the Centostella Kingdom raised her hand to seek permission to speak.

"Yes?"

"Is this something I should be sitting in on?"

Sensing that they were about to touch upon the troublesome secrets of this foreign country, Lilianna sought some necessary clarification. If they continued to speak before her after this clarification, then she couldn't be held responsible for learning their secrets.

"Yes. Do you recall the banquet where Lady Satsuki was revealed to the public? I wish to ask for your account of that event as well."

“I understand. In that case, I shall remain.”

“Now, let’s get straight to business.” Charlotte spread out a sheet of paper on the table before her. Those seated farther away couldn’t make out the text, but all their gazes focused on that sheet.

“What’s this paper for, Char?” Satsuki wondered, peering at the text.

“This is the national archive of the Kingdom of Galarc. Or rather, the draft of it.”

“National archive?” Masato, Satsuki, and Miharu all looked confused at the unfamiliar term.

Charlotte gave them a brief explanation of the topic. “A national archive is an official record of the history of the kingdom. It’s normally drafted by an official that specializes in the details of history and penned by a secretary, but the final decision on what gets recorded lies with the king. There have been occasions where the king personally wrote the draft of the national archives.”

“So what was wrong with the archives?” Satsuki asked.

“This paper contains the events of what happened before the recent battle. It was written before our departure at Father’s official request, as seen by the mark of the royal stamp.”

“What does it say...?”

“In short, our kingdom was invaded by the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica, which seized the capital of Duke Gregory’s territory. The leader of this nation is one of the chosen heroes—a self-proclaimed saint that goes by the name Erica. With Lady Satsuki’s endorsement, our kingdom dispatched the army to recapture the city. As the king, Father was to command the army. That’s the general gist of it.”

“My endorsement...?” Satsuki blinked in confusion. She couldn’t recall giving such a thing.

“Yes. In other words, our kingdom has just gone through a battle with a nation led by another hero. Because we were opposing a hero, we sought the support of our own kingdom’s hero before heading to war. That was why Lady

Satsuki had gone all the way to the battlefield. Everyone else here went along to accompany her. This appears to be the full sequence of events,” Charlotte said, explaining things in chronological order.

“Right... I headed out to the battlefield...”

Satsuki looked around at everyone’s faces with a look of uncertainty. They all had similar expressions to hers, as they all recalled heading to Greille out of their own will.

“It seems everyone’s understanding of the situation is the same, then. We couldn’t recall that our enemy was a hero. We didn’t even remember her name. Even now, the hero named Erica doesn’t ring any bells. Is this correct?” Charlotte questioned the group at large. Everyone nodded with perplexed looks.

“It’s an enigma. Father says he cannot recall ordering such a draft to be written by the secretary. The secretary doesn’t recall receiving such orders from Father either. Yet, this draft of the national archive exists. Father’s official stamp is on it, and the situation at hand supports the contents of the draft.” Charlotte smiled as though she was enjoying herself.

“There are other enigmas as well. Soldiers of the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica were captured and interrogated, but they claimed to have no recollection of anyone named Erica.”

Was such a thing possible? Yet Charlotte questioned the group in a cheery tone.

“Incidentally, the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica is a minor nation that was only recently established. Frankly speaking, they have no value as a nation. The force that invaded Greille consisted of the hero and nine others. None of the nine soldiers had abilities that could compare to those of a knight—they were basically former adventurers. And so, I’d like to direct this question to Gouki: Is it possible for such a group of people to seize an entire city governed by a duke of our kingdom?”

“No, it’s impossible. It would take at least one person of exceptional ability to pull such a thing off.”

Without one, they would have failed the moment they tried to seize the city. Unless they managed to create a hostage situation, they would have been surrounded by the city guards and suppressed instantly.

“Thank you for answering. In that case, this hero named Erica that no one seems to know must have been the one to seize the city. Would you agree that this is the most logical way of thinking?” Charlotte asked cheerfully.

“Good grief, it isn’t a matter to be enjoying so openly,” Francois scolded with a sigh.

“But it’s so mystifying! What exactly have we all forgotten? I’m just dying to know the answer.”

“I can agree with wanting to know the answer. How am I to update the national archive with events I cannot recall?” While that wasn’t the only issue at hand, as the king, it was a major source of woe for Francois.

“There are other memories we are missing as well,” Charlotte continued.

Francois sighed at Charlotte’s good mood. “Indeed. Go on, then.”

“Right. After reading everything I could get my hands on, I came to the realization that there was one more person we’re missing our memories of. And I believe that person was on close terms with us in a good way.”

“Who would that be...?” Satsuki asked.

“The owner of this mansion. Father and I believed we had prepared this mansion as a residence for Lady Satsuki’s friends, but the documents we have say that this place was bestowed upon a certain honorary knight. The records we have of his achievements are outrageous—before I give you his name, I’d like to read those records first. It may get a little long, so bear with me...”

With that preface, Charlotte took out another sheet of paper.

“According to these records, this person protected Lady Miharuru and those she was summoned with when she first wandered into this world. He made a major contribution to repelling the outbreak of monsters in Amande’s outskirts. He saved Liselotte and Princess Flora, and attended Lady Satsuki’s introduction banquet with Liselotte as a result. He made a major contribution to repelling

the insurgents that raided the banquet, after which he was appointed as an honorary knight of our kingdom. He mediated the dispute between Sir Takahisa and Lady Miharuru. Then, it was revealed that he had prevented Lady Celia's political marriage to Charles Arbor on the order of Princess Christina. He assisted Princess Christina's escape from her kingdom, escorting her safely from Lady Celia's family home to Rodania. Along the way, he defeated Alfred Emerle, Beltrum Kingdom's strongest knight, who was then taken prisoner with Charles Arbor. He then rescued Princess Christina and Princess Flora, who were abducted by Lucius Orgueil, commander of the Heavenly Lions. Finally, it says he rescued Liselotte, who was abducted to the Holy Democratic Republic of Erica by the hero Erica, bringing her back to Galarc."

Charlotte read the record of that person's achievements for several long minutes.

"It truly is outrageous," she repeated with a sigh of admiration.

"..."

Was the list too long to be believable? Or was the lack of any memory of those events too shocking? Either way, the people whose names were just mentioned were silent in wide-eyed shock.

Charlotte turned to each of them in turn. "Those whose names I just read aloud—do you recall any of these events? And does the name Haruto Amakawa sound familiar to any of you?"

As soon as the name was revealed, several people immediately reacted in their expressions—namely Miharuru, Latifa, and Liselotte. Liselotte's reaction was minimal, however...

"That's a Japanese name, isn't it...?"

"It resembles the names that can be found in the Yagumo region as well."

Satsuki and Gouki commented on the sound of the name. The others didn't show any recognition of the name—besides Celia, who tilted her head in thought.

"Did it ring any bells for you, Lady Celia?" Charlotte asked. She had been observing everyone for their reactions.

“Umm... I believe I’ve received a letter from someone of that name before. He was called Haruto as well... Huh?”

What Celia was referring to was the letter Rio had sent her shortly after departing from the Royal Academy. He had actually sent another one upon returning to Strahl, but Celia was already under Duke Arbor’s control at the time, so she never received it.

At any rate, the one letter she’d received from Rio was very precious to her. She had never been able to throw it out...which was why she was able to recall his face in her head. When she thought of that face as Haruto Amakawa’s, it all made sense.

However, no sooner had everything clicked, a fog filled her mind. The image in her head was blurred over and scattered, and she found herself unsure of who Haruto Amakawa was once again.

“Is something the matter?” Charlotte asked.

“No, it’s just that I can’t recall whom I received the letter from... So why do I remember receiving a letter...?”

Celia pressed her hands against her forehead, bewildered by the questions rushing about in her head.

“If you’re still in possession of that letter, I would love to see it.”

“I think I still have it... I’ll have to look for it later.”

“Please do. And Lady Miharū.”

Miharū hadn’t expected to be addressed and flinched in surprise. “Huh? Yes?”

“Your expression just now implies that you recognized something. Would you like to share?”

“Right... Umm, my childhood friend had the exact same name as him. Last names came first in our world, so he was called Amakawa Haruto instead.”

“Lady Miharū’s childhood friend, you say? Amakawa Haruto...”

“He’s back in my original world, so I believe it’s just a coincidence...”

“Are you sure? You might just be missing the memories, and he could have

been summoned to this world with you.”

“But... Even before we came to this world, it had been a long time since we last met. We parted ways in our childhood.”

“In your childhood... And do you still recall his face now?”

“Yes.” Miharu nodded firmly.

“Is recalling him enough to guarantee he’s a different person to this honorary knight? Dismissing this as a coincidence sounds a little too hasty... What about you, Liselotte and Lady Suzune? Your expressions changed when the name Haruto Amakawa was brought up as well.” Charlotte turned to Latifa and Liselotte.

“I should have expected as much.” Liselotte had been trying to hide her reaction as much as possible, so she was impressed by Charlotte’s keen eye. But she wasn’t able to answer her question right away, turning to look at Latifa beside her instead.

“Umm... I know the name Haruto Amakawa as well...” Latifa admitted after some hesitation.

“Where from?”

“That’s...” Charlotte had a strong look of curiosity in her eyes as she questioned Latifa. But Latifa seemed reluctant to answer her. The name was familiar to her because it involved her past life. Answering Charlotte would inevitably require explaining how she was reborn into this world.

“Allow me to explain.” Liselotte spoke up to protect Latifa.

“Liselotte...?”

“I recognize the name as well. It’s the name of the university student who rode the bus with us in our past life, isn’t it?” Liselotte spoke to Latifa not in the Strahl tongue, but in Japanese. It was an unfamiliar language to hear coming from Liselotte, which surprised Francois and Charlotte. Their eyes widened faintly.

“Y-Yeah.”

“Then, leave it to me,” Liselotte assured her, then turned to the two royals

present. “The reason why Suzune and I are surprised is because we hadn’t expected that name to come up here. However, if you wish for me to explain why, then I must ask that you keep this a secret, Your Majesty, Princess Charlotte.”

“Very well,” Francois agreed, sending Charlotte a look for her to follow his lead.

Charlotte agreed. “I can’t wait to hear what Liselotte is about to say,” she added happily.

Liselotte took a deep breath before beginning to speak. “In terms of metaphysics, do either of you believe in reincarnation or rebirth? That is, do you believe humans can have past lives?”

“I believe it. It sounds romantic,” Charlotte replied without missing a beat.

“It is a phenomenon that sounds impossible to prove objectively, but there is still room for consideration provided the right evidence.” Francois gave a more realistic opinion of reincarnation while being flexible enough not to deny it completely. Besides, the fact Liselotte was bringing this up out of the blue probably meant she had such evidence. He looked at her to prompt her to continue.

“I’m afraid I don’t possess any objective evidence, but Suzune and I both have memories of our past lives.”

“Oh my,” Charlotte beamed in delight.

“Memories of past lives, you say...”

Memories were an entirely subjective matter, so testimonies that were given based on memory always had questionable authenticity.

However, the testimony was by none other than Liselotte Cretia. If Francois was asked to name the most talented noblewoman in the kingdom, he would immediately give her name without hesitation.

“This may not serve as sufficient proof, but many of the Ricca Guild’s products are designed from the knowledge I possessed of my past life.”

“I see... Indeed, your many novel products have been a contributing factor to

your company's growth."

If they originated from the knowledge of another world, then it all made sense.

"I've kept my silence about this until now because I feared how people would react to such a topic," Liselotte continued.

"Indeed, it isn't a topic to speak openly about."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I will proceed on the assumption that you can believe this for now. By some turn of fate, Suzune and I both lived in the same world as Lady Satsuki and Miharuru in our past lives. While we weren't friends in our past lives, we've confirmed with Miharuru that it was indeed the same world as hers."

Francois, who had been listening with suspended disbelief until then, couldn't hide the shock on his face. "What...?"

"Umm, I heard it through Miharuru, but I believe it's the truth. Liselotte has memories of living in the same world as us."

"Hmm..."

Satsuki backed up Liselotte's testimony. With that, Francois could no longer listen with suspended disbelief. That was how heavily the hero's words weighed.



“Suzune and I often rode the same bus—which is a means of transport like a horse and carriage—in our past lives,” Liselotte explained. “We rode it so often, we could recognize each other’s faces. And there was one more passenger who often rode that bus with us...”

“The gentleman named Amakawa Haruto?” Charlotte asked, jumping straight to the conclusion.

“Yes.”

“There’s one thing I’d like to confirm first. You said you weren’t friends with Lady Suzune in your past life, so how did you come to realize your past lives were from the same world?”

“Our reunion in this world was a coincidence... But it was partially caused by my naming of the Ricca Guild’s products after items in our past world. We realized we were vaguely acquainted with each other when we both mentioned how we died in a bus crash. That allowed us to connect the dots,” Liselotte said, wrapping up her explanation.

“That makes it even harder to dismiss this as a coincidence. Wouldn’t you agree, Father?”

“Indeed...”

“All that leaves is the matter of whether Liselotte and Lady Suzune’s Amakawa Haruto is the same as Lady Miharu’s Amakawa Haruto. In fact, if Liselotte and Lady Suzune were reborn into this world, then it’s possible that he was reborn here as well. And if he was reborn here, he could be the Haruto Amakawa mentioned in our records...”

“...” The entire group held their breaths.

“So, what do you say, Lady Miharu?” Charlotte asked once again. “You should have been placed under the protection of Haruto Amakawa soon after arriving in this world.”

“That’s—right. Yes, I was... Someone was protecting me... Someone... I... Haruto...”

Miharu searched through her memories, but the look in her eyes grew more

vacant as time passed. Before long, her entire mind was in a dazed state—but she didn't want to lose her train of thought. She grabbed desperately at the memories that were rapidly fading away to retain them, when she clutched her head as a sharp pain ran through it.

“Urk?!” she groaned.

Immediately after...

Stop, don't force yourself to remember.

...a panicked voice spoke to Miharuru directly in her head.

“Miharuru!”

“You okay?!”

Everyone called Miharuru's name worriedly. Satsuki, who was seated beside her, touched her on the shoulder. At that, Miharuru slowly raised her head, her headache fading as quickly as it came on.

“Umm... I can't remember,” she said, blinking away her daze.

Seeing Miharuru's reaction, Charlotte seemed to realize something with her natural intuition. “That settles it, Father,” she said to Francois proudly.

“Settles what?” Francois asked, puzzled. Her normally wise father was being oddly slow on the uptake. That was the first thought that occurred to Charlotte, who then decided to put her realization into words.

“You know...about Haruto Amakawa...” But as she started speaking, she found herself stumbling for words.

“What's the matter, Charlotte?”

“Oh... What was I trying to say again?”

The rest of her sentence completely slipped her mind. She had no memory of what she was just trying to say. She recalled saying something about Haruto Amakawa's record of achievements, but...

“I'll investigate this a bit more.”

“Very well...”

Thus, their productive discussions ended there. However, everyone in the room felt the same indescribable feeling, as though they had forgotten something unnaturally...

That indescribable feeling lingered around them.



After Francois had left for the castle, Charlotte called out the names of two people before the rest of the group disbanded.

“Oh yes, there was one more thing I had to say,” she said. “To Princess Lilianna and Lady Celia.”

“Yes?”

“What is it?”

“Firstly, Princess Lilianna. Your letter has been sent to the Centostella Kingdom. We can expect a reply within a week.”

“Thank you for going to such trouble. I appreciate it greatly.”

Charlotte smiled at Lilianna. “Not at all. Next, Lady Celia...”

“Yes?”

“The Restoration has sent a messenger. Princess Christina and Princess Flora will be arriving here tomorrow.”

“Thank you for the notice. That’s right, the conference with the main government of Beltrum Kingdom is coming up soon. In another five days, if I recall correctly...”

Christina had asked Celia whether she was willing to attend the meeting. The strife with Greille had completely wiped the thought from her head.

Restoration and the Beltrum Kingdom were both participating in the meeting. There was no way of changing the schedule. At worst, she might have had to pass on participating in the meeting, but they had fortunately returned with enough time to spare.

“I’m thinking of discussing what’s happening to us with Princess Christina and Princess Flora. I will show them to this mansion when they arrive, but will you

have time to meet with us?”

“Of course.”

Suddenly, Sara marched briskly up to the window and threw the curtains open. They were currently on the ground floor. When she looked out the glass window, she could see the guards patrolling nearby. The guards had noticed her opening the curtain and were looking back at her.

“What’s wrong, Sara?” Celia asked.

“I thought there was someone there...but it seems I was mistaken.” Sara nodded at the guards in greeting then turned back to Celia. However, she was certain she had sensed someone there.

Meanwhile, Sora was standing on the roof of the mansion. When their group returned to the Galarc Castle, Rio had relocated his group to the city outskirts. Sora was infiltrating the castle grounds under Rio’s orders, observing what kind of effect the memory loss had on everyone. She had been watching Charlotte give her report earlier, but she quickly retreated to the roof when the patrolling guards came by.

Hmm... They’re unable to recall anything. When they reach the verge of recalling something, they immediately forget it once again. There’s no defying the correction of the world.

Over and over, the world would correct itself... That was the fate of the transcendent ones. That was how it had been for the past thousand—and more—years, unchanging throughout time.

The moment the Dragon King uses a new transcendent power, everyone forgets about him once again.

Sora looked up at the sky sadly. Her gaze was locked onto Rio, staring down at the ground from where he floated high above.

Right now, Sora is the only one who can remember the Dragon King forever...

That’s what she had thought, but Rio currently had Aishia beside him. She was wearing a mask to prevent her spirit presence from being detected.

F-Fine, maybe there’s Aishia as well...

Sora puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

Sora can't keep him waiting. Time to head back.

She quickly ascended to where Rio and Aishia were waiting.



The next afternoon, as planned, Christina and Flora arrived at the Galarc Castle. Charlotte led them to the mansion where Miharuru and the others were living, and they met Celia in a parlor to talk. After Celia exchanged ecstatic greetings with the princesses of her homeland, they sat down facing each other. Charlotte was seated beside Celia.

“I was shocked when I heard you went to the battlefield, Professor. I’m so glad to see you’re unharmed,” Flora said first, sighing in relief.

“I was there, but I remained at the rear the entire time. The war ended before I knew it, so I’m perfectly fine, as you can see.”

“Princess Charlotte gave us a brief summary on our way here. She said everyone was experiencing some kind of strange memory loss.” Christina looked at Celia curiously. It was hard to imagine standing on a battlefield with no idea who the opponent was. She wanted to hear the opinion of her teacher firsthand.

“It’s true. I honestly have no idea what happened...”

“Does that mean you’ve lost your memories too, Professor?”

Celia nodded hesitantly. “So it seems...”

“As I explained on the way here, there’s something we’d like to ask the two of you regarding this incident as well. If you don’t mind?”

“Of course, go ahead.”

Christina agreed to Charlotte’s proposal. And so, she got straight to the point.

“Now then...”

With that preface, Charlotte began to tell Christina and Flora exactly what she had said at the group meeting just yesterday. That was, that there was evidence of two people having existed, but no one possessed any memory of them.

“I see...” Christina thought to herself with a faraway look.

“I want to ask the two of you about someone named Haruto Amakawa. According to our records, this person has been heavily involved with the two of you as well. For example, he rescued Lady Celia from her wedding with Charles Arbor at Princess Christina’s order, and he also escorted Princess Charlotte and Lady Celia from Cleia to Rodania. Princess Flora should have had several opportunities to witness his feats as well... Does any of this sound familiar?” Charlotte asked, looking between the two Beltrum princesses one after another.

“No... I have no memory of giving out such an order,” Christina replied, blinking blankly. In a way, it was only natural for her to have no memories of that. After all, she truly hadn’t done such a thing. Christina had merely used that as an explanation in order to shift the responsibility of Celia’s abduction onto herself.

“I also do not recall traveling with such a person on the way from Cleia to Rodania. After meeting up with Professor Celia in Cleia, we received the assistance of Sara, Orphia, and Alma in order to reach our destination...”

Like the others, Christina’s memories had become unclear.

“That is what Lady Celia and Lady Sara’s group said as well. However, none of them have the memory of driving back the King’s Sword Alfred Emerle by themselves,” Charlotte said, noting the inconsistency in their memories with the records that existed.

“That’s...true...” Christina replied falteringly. She attempted to recall what had happened in regard to that, but...

“That’s strange. No matter how hard I try, I can’t recall who defeated Alfred. I see, so this is what you meant by missing memories.”

As the saying went, seeing is believing. With this, Christina experienced the strange phenomenon that was occurring firsthand.

Flora cocked her head curiously. “I don’t know that person either...”

“My memories of when I was abducted from the wedding at the capital are unclear as well. I also wanted to ask—Princess Christina, would you happen to

know the reason why I'm in Galarc in the first place, when I'm meant to be a member of the Restoration?"

Celia looked frustrated at how little she knew about her own situation.

"That's... I was in attendance at your wedding. I recall a hooded figure gallantly whisking you away from the ceremony, but nothing else... And the reason why you were sent to Galarc was because of your friendship with Sara and Miharuru's circle..."

Something was odd. She had given the first reason that came to her mind, but it seemed strangely weak to be the motive. Celia's talents as a sorcerer were exceptional. It would have made sense if she had been relocated for a special role, but she was too valuable to leave wandering freely.

"Right... I've spoken to Miharuru and Sara's group about this, but none of us have any idea how we met in the first place. The more we discussed it, the more our memories got mixed up."

Celia sighed tiredly. There had been countless discussions held since their memories first became vague.

"There are other similar events happening as well. The honorary knight Haruto Amakawa aside, no one can remember anything about the hero named Erica either. It's clearly an unnatural situation, yet the great majority are unconcerned about it, making it even more abnormal. It's almost as though our thoughts are being controlled."

"Indeed... The more I think about this, the heavier the fog in my mind gets. It's almost like my brain doesn't want to think about it..." Christina said slowly, objectively analyzing her own thinking process.

Charlotte beamed in delight. "I'm glad to hear that from you. From my investigations, the majority of people don't share that opinion."

"Really?"

"There's no way of confirming if our thoughts are truly being controlled or not, but the majority of people seem to think there's nothing wrong with missing memories. Some have even expressed doubt that such people existed in the first place, and others have forgotten the fact they're missing memories."

This seems to be more common with those who were less connected. It seems we were deeply connected with Haruto Amakawa, as we recognize this abnormal situation for what it is. But if we let our guard down, we could also be at risk of forgetting this investigation.”

“Is it possible that some kind of large-scale sorcery has been used to control our thoughts...?” Christina asked, looking at Celia.

“I’ve considered that possibility, but the range of the effect is so vast, it’s impossible. I’ve checked if we’ve been hit by any strange sorcery, but I couldn’t detect anything...”

“How odd... It’s almost like someone’s trying to erase the two of them from history,” Flora mumbled.

“Yes, exactly. As if there’s an unseen divine power at play.”

“That sounds like the only option—but you seem oddly pleased about it.” Seeing Charlotte as excited as a child given a toy box made Christina smile with a hint of exasperation.

“Because we rarely ever experience anything this fascinating. What kind of relation did this person have with us? The more the truth tries to hide itself, the more curious I get,” Charlotte said, highlighting her inherent curiosity. The other three chuckled even more at that. On top of that...

“I agree. Everyone else said the same too. We’re all curious. It feels like we’ve forgotten something we shouldn’t have forgotten...”

Celia felt the same as Charlotte. Her strong will shimmered in her eyes heatedly. She didn’t know why, but perhaps the loss of memory hadn’t completely erased her emotions.

“At any rate, we have no choice but to continue investigations. Princess Christina, could I trouble you to search through Rodania’s documents when you return home?”

“I’d be glad to. Especially since it seems we’re indebted to this person,” Christina agreed readily.

“In that case, please accept this. And keep it on you at all times.” Charlotte

placed a brooch on the table.

“What is it?”

“A countermeasure for memory loss. I’ve written down my request on the paper inside. I’ve prepared one for Princess Flora as well, so you can both take these with you.”

This way, even if they forgot, they’d be able to recall Charlotte’s request by looking at the paper.

“I see... We’ll accept this gratefully.”

“Thank you for the consideration.”

Christina and Flora softly picked up the brooches.

“This was all I had to discuss. If there’s anything you wished to discuss with Lady Celia, please go ahead.”

“Then I’ll keep this brief. It’s about the meeting with Duke Arbor.”

“It’s only four days away now.”

“We’re very likely to return the hostages as planned, so I intend on bringing up the treatment of the Count Claire family as one of our exchange conditions. Count Claire will also be in attendance.”

“Thank you for making the arrangements.”

“Not at all. First, I wanted to make one last check on your thoughts of attending.”

“I don’t have any other plans, so I can attend.”

It was one of the few opportunities to meet her father in public, and it was over a matter involving her own family. Celia gave her answer resolutely.

“Then, second... With the discussion we’ve just had in mind, we plan on interrogating Alfred and Charles one last time. Would you like to attend that? This invitation extends to you too, Princess Charlotte.”

The discussion they’d just had probably referred to the memory loss phenomenon. There had been a fight that caused Alfred and Charles to be captured. It seemed like she wanted to hear their account of events before they

were returned.

“I have no reason to refuse,” Charlotte replied. As someone investigating Haruto Amakawa, it was in her interests to attend.

Meanwhile, Celia had a rather complicated past with Charles. She had been practically threatened into an engagement with him, which was then scrapped when she was abducted from the wedding ceremony. Even though her memories around the incident were vague, she still remembered wanting to break off the engagement of her own will at the very last moment before they were married. Charles would inevitably be enraged to hear this truth.

That was why she hadn’t stood in front of Charles as Celia Claire since the day their marriage was scrapped. But if she wanted to continue living as Celia Claire, then she had to face him someday. It was something to ascertain after the meeting with Duke Arbor.

“Yes. Please let me attend.” Celia clenched her fists and nodded.



One hour later, while Flora remained in the mansion to give her greetings to Miharuru and everyone, Christina, Charlotte, and Celia headed for the foreign guest house of the Galarc Castle. They went through the lobby and down a corridor, where they were promptly met by someone who had heard of their arrival.

“Good day to you, Princess Christina, Princess Charlotte, and Celia,” Duke Huguenot said, bowing his head reverently.

“We’re about to question Alfred and Charles,” Christina informed him shortly.

“Is that so? I can accompany you if you so wish, but...” Duke Huguenot glanced at Celia. He seemed to guess that they were there to allow Celia to meet Charles.

“We won’t be discussing anything important, so you may prioritize your own duties.”

“Understood. Then I will return to my duties.”

All the necessary interrogations had already been conducted. Duke Huguenot

seemed to see no need to accompany them any further, so he proceeded to excuse himself.

“This way.”

Led by Christina, Celia and Charlotte climbed the stairs. They arrived before a room on the top floor, then entered with two of their guards.

“Princess Christina! What a surprise.”

Several knights, including Vanessa, were inside the room, and they all straightened at the sight of the girls entering.

“We’re here to question the two of them. Take us in.”

“Understood.”

They were currently located in the living room of the suite on the top floor of the foreign guest house. Vanessa opened the door to the bedroom.

“Brother, you’re wanted for questioning,” she said to Alfred Emerle within. Although Charles and Alfred were prisoners, they were still nobles of the Beltrum Kingdom. Instead of being thrown into a musty dungeon, they were kept under guarded house arrest in this suite.

Their magic was sealed with cuffs around their wrists, and the shackles around their feet prevented them from running around.

“Right.”

Alfred had been reading a book, but he moved to the living room as directed.

“Sit,” Christina ordered as soon as he left the room.

“Yes, Your Highness...”

Alfred’s eyes widened at the sight of Celia beside Christina, but he obediently obeyed the order and sat down.

“I will call for Charles.”

Vanessa turned and headed for the other bedroom, summoning him to the living room as well.

“What, do you still have something to—Celia?!”

Charles arrived with a fed-up attitude towards the interrogation, but expressed his shock upon seeing Celia in the living room.

Celia took a small breath and bowed. "Long time no see, Sir Charles."

"So you were a traitor all along..."

Charles frowned bitterly. He made no attempt to hide his displeasure, instead turning it into an emotional blade pointed at Celia.

"Sit."

"Sit? How dare you! Who do you think I am?!"

Charles snapped at Vanessa for giving him an order. Then, as if he thought that even that anger should be taken out on Celia—

"This is a grave matter," he spat, glaring at Celia.

"What is?" Christina asked calmly.

"I'm talking about the Count Claire family's betrayal. Both during the wedding, and at Cleia. Though I thought it was just the father that was colluding with the Restoration."

"That's an odd claim to make. Whom exactly did Professor Celia betray?"

"Me! The Duke Arbor family! She was a shameless bitch under that innocent face, fooling me until the day of our wedding. Trampling on my kindness in accepting an old hag for a wife like this!" Charles snapped, criticizing Celia's choices with harsh words.

"..."

Although Celia frowned, she remained silent.

"How unsightly," Charlotte muttered with a sigh.

Charles was startled. "Wh-What?"

"Hmm? Did you say something?" Charlotte cocked her head cheerfully, feigning ignorance.

Christina mirrored Charlotte, tilting her head diagonally with a curious look. "She pledged loyalty to the First Princess who lamented for the future of the

kingdom and offered her life. How is that a betrayal?"

"H...How isn't it a betrayal? We nobles are to pledge loyalty to the King and kingdom! Not the First Princess! Thus, both this woman and you are no more than rebels against the King and kingdom!" Charles argued heatedly.

Christina smiled with cold contempt. "How amusing. I didn't imagine those words coming from someone who has been trying to seize control of the kingdom from the king they clearly despise."

"My actions were made out of consideration for the king and kingdom! When the gutless Huguenot gained power, our kingdom lost territory to the Proxia Empire. His Majesty and Huguenot underestimated Proxia's power! That's why —"

"Nevertheless, that doesn't justify how you sold out the kingdom."

"S-Sold...out...?!"

Charles frowned in displeasure at Christina's words, which overlapped with his.

"I agree with Princess Christina. The actions of the Duke Arbor family have been an attack on the kingdom itself. That's why I decided to join the Restoration in support of Princess Christina."

Celia expressed her feelings, conveying her opposition to Charles clearly.

"You...!"

"That's enough. I've heard enough of your side," Christina said, interrupting Charles once more.

"Then what did you call me out for?!" Charles snapped irritably.

"It's about the events leading to your capture here. Do you recall whom you lost to?"

"What are you saying...?"

Charles shot her a skeptical glare, but then looked more confused as he processed the question. Seated beside him in silence, Alfred looked equally puzzled.

“Alfred.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Do you recall who you fought and lost to, and how you were taken prisoner in the first place?” Christina asked, looking straight at Alfred.

Alfred paused for a long moment, then shook his head. “No, I do not.”

He didn’t seem to be lying. The confusion was clear on his face.

“I see... Princess Charlotte, do you have any follow-up questions?”

“No, I’ve heard enough.”

“Then, Vanessa, you may show them back to their rooms.”

“Understood. This way, brother.” Vanessa bowed her head deeply, then escorted Alfred and Charles back to their bedrooms one after another.

Chapter 6: Talks

The day of the talks between the Restoration and Beltrum Kingdom had arrived.

On one side was the Restoration, represented by Christina and Duke Huguenot.

On the other was the Beltrum Kingdom, represented by Duke Arbor's faction.

And on the third, as witness, was King Francois of Galarc.

The leaders of the three powers gathered in a room of the guest house once used to introduce Satsuki as a hero.

“...”

The opposing forces sat facing each other, silently looking through their documents under the heavy air.

The documents in the Restoration representatives' hands contained the list of the Beltrum Kingdom's demands, while the documents in the Beltrum Kingdom representatives' hands had the list of the Restoration's demands. Francois had copies of both documents in his hands.

Father...

Celia...

Celia and her father Roland were also in the room. Despite being parent and child, they were seated on opposite sides as they worried for each other.

“Have you all done reading?”

After both sides had finished looking over the documents, King Francois opened his mouth as the chairman and witness of the meeting.

“Yes.”

“We're ready.”

Christina and Duke Arbor replied at the same time.

“Then we will now go through everything from the top. First, the points that I found to be unreasonable. From Beltrum Kingdom, the dissolution of the Restoration and surrender of all affiliated nobility. From the Restoration, the forfeiture of the prime minister and military general positions back to the King, and the resignation of all current ministers and officials.”

In short, the Beltrum Kingdom’s demand was “surrender immediately and hand over the rebels to be punished,” while the Restoration’s demand was “remove all Duke Arbor faction nobles from the key positions of the kingdom, and give up the faction’s power.” It was only natural for Francois to consider these demands unreasonable.

However, unreasonable as they were, these were the main goals of each side. They wouldn’t have broken up the kingdom in the first place if they were able to accept the demands of the other.

“And just to be clear, neither of you have any intention of accepting these demands, is that correct?” Francois asked both representatives.

“That is correct.”

“Likewise.”

Christina and Duke Arbor both replied immediately. They had both presented these demands with full awareness of how unreasonable they were.

Making unreasonable demands in the first place may seem unnecessary, but that wasn’t the case. Only by opening with such unreasonable demands could negotiations begin for compromise. Placing the main demand on the back burner to make the opposing party compare it to the first demand was the clever way of going about things.

“Next, for the other demands. The Beltrum Kingdom wants the two hostages, the Light Blade of Judgment, and the presumably stolen regalia returned. The Restoration wants the guaranteed status and safety of the Count Claire family and connected figures. They also wish to make the Claire territory a neutral zone and appoint Count Claire’s people as a mediator between both sides. Are both parties willing to accept these demands?”

Francois read the demands from the documents in his hands. The demands

seemed to be as expected, as Christina gave her answer easily.

“Depending on the conditions, I am,” she said.

At the same time, Duke Arbor nodded reluctantly. “We are also willing to accept some of the demands, depending on the conditions,”

“Then what are the conditions being requested?”

“We are prepared to guarantee Charles Arbor’s safe return in exchange for the demand regarding the Count Claire family,” Christina stated calmly. The negotiations seemed to be going as predicted, as Duke Huguenot looked cool and composed beside her.

“We cannot accept all your demands to the letter, but we will give you due consideration if all our demanded items are returned.”

In contrast to Christina offering Charles Arbor alone, Duke Arbor made the demand for her to hand over everything.

Naturally, Christina was unwilling to budge. “Don’t make me laugh. You’re asking us to present you everything in exchange for ‘due consideration.’”

“You’re asking for all the traitors to be excused. I’d appreciate it if you had more awareness of the weight of your demands,” Duke Arbor snapped in annoyance, glaring at Celia and Roland.

“I could say the same for you, Duke Arbor. From our point of view, you and your son are the traitors.”

“What a ridiculous claim to make. Who exactly are the traitors here? It’s clear who the rebels betraying the kingdom are here.” Duke Huguenot scoffed in spite of himself.

“It almost sounds like you’re accusing me of being a rebel,” Christina pointed out.

“That is exactly what I’m saying,” Duke Arbor stated firmly.

“Such words would be considered blasphemy before the First Princess. It sounds like you’re making light of the royal heir.”

“Another absurd claim. Royal authority belongs to the king, not you.”

Christina calmly continued bearing the brunt of Duke Arbor's verbal attacks, but he was more brazen than she had expected.

"You're the one being absurd. As I said to your son already—the Duke Arbor family has been trying to seize control of the kingdom from the king they clearly despise."

Duke Arbor sneered. "Ridiculous. I have and always will place my life on the line for the kingdom of Beltrum."

"The one that nobles should be pledging allegiance to is the king. That is what Charles said, but are you of the same opinion?"

"Indeed I am."

"If that's true, then the current Duke Arbor family's disdain for the royal family leaves questions to be answered."

"Such baseless claims. I have no recollection of making light of anyone, and my every action had been for the sake of the king and kingdom," Duke Arbor said, making the same claims as Charles. In fact, it was probably Charles who followed in the footsteps of this duke.

"I see. So you say your loyalty is only for my father and kingdom."

"Indeed so. This is why I see the Restoration's opposition to royal authority as rebellion. Being the princess does not exempt you by any means. You are flying the flag of rebellion against His Majesty and the kingdom."

Duke Arbor criticized Christina harshly, threatening her.

But Christina wouldn't lose. She spoke dauntlessly, staring straight back at Duke Arbor.

"I'm not sitting here with some kind of false resolve. I have no intention of opposing royal authority either. My anger is purely directed at you, Duke Arbor."

"In the first place, as the prime minister, I am attending these negotiations with the full authority of the king. Thus, defying me is equivalent to defying His Majesty. You should think of my words as the words of your father."

"Are you claiming to have royal authority?"

“I’m saying I’m attending this meeting on behalf of royal authority.”

“You’re the only noble in the history of Beltrum who has had both the positions of prime minister and military general. But it’s dangerous for the powers outside of the king to be so concentrated. I am also concerned about your control over so much power. The only person who should have power to move the kingdom is the king.”

Originally, the prime minister was meant to be the highest administrative position in the country, with the authority to represent the king in administrative decisions, and the military general was the highest military position, with the authority to represent the king in high-level military decisions. Although both positions were more honorary than permanent, it was believed that the ability to make decisions on behalf of the king made them capable of exercising as much power as the king himself.

Thus, it could be said that the current Beltrum Kingdom’s royal authority was shared between the king and Duke Arbor. The king had the right to deny Duke Arbor the right to represent him, but with the overwhelming number of nobles on Duke Arbor’s side, that right had become more of a formality. The true power balance was tilted in Duke Arbor’s favor.

“I completely agree. There is no need for two kings in a kingdom. However, my positions as prime minister and military general were both bestowed upon me by the king himself. His Majesty has both the appointive power and right to refuse representation, so he is still above me in position.”

“Then why doesn’t father do anything? To me, it seems like you’re the only one making the important decisions over the Beltrum government right now.”

“That’s how pressured the kingdom is nowadays. With all due respect, His Majesty made a mistake in the struggle against the Proxia Empire when he was deceived by Huguenot over there.” Duke Arbor made a show of sneering at Duke Huguenot.

“...” Duke Huguenot didn’t show any reaction. He was a cunning man capable of controlling his emotions when necessary—he wasn’t foolish enough to react heatedly here.

“As a result of belittling the Proxia Empire’s threat, our kingdom lost a vital

point of national defense, making His Majesty lose authority. That was when I, with His Majesty's leave, stood in the firing line as the prime minister and military general."

"That was the incident where you suddenly changed your aggressive stance towards the Proxia Empire and began to compromise with them."

"When the situation changes, policy must change with it."

"You approached the Proxia Empire before our base was stolen. You claimed to be opposing the Proxia Empire on the surface when you were actually in secret talks to sell out the kingdom in the shadows."

Christina made an attack to throw Duke Arbor off-balance, but he couldn't be shaken by such a thing.

"You accuse me of selling out the kingdom? I was the one who regained the land through negotiations. I'd love to see the face of whoever suggested such a thing."

"So that you can dispose of them?" she asked.

"Ha ha ha."

Duke Arbor laughed coldly.

"The Proxia Empire's ambassador was called Reiss Vulfe, right? It seems you're rather close with him."

"He is a diplomat of the empire and the ambassador of our kingdom. It is only natural to treat him with respect."

"I've met Reiss before, on my flight to Rodania. He led the mercenaries of the Heavenly Lions and tried to capture me. They were collaborating with the pursuit team from Charles."

"So I've heard. Mr. Reiss grieved for the state of our kingdom and offered his assistance."

"In other words, Reiss's actions were in accordance with your intentions?"

"The actual command was entrusted to my son Charles, but I received progress reports along the way and deemed there was no issue. I also heard Mr.

Reiss is a talented sorcerer himself.”

“That talented foreign sorcerer made military movements on our land. Are you still saying there was no issue?”

“As long as it’s under our kingdom’s control, it isn’t a problem. In the first place, Mr. Reiss has been bestowed with diplomatic immunity. It would be one thing if he had been leading an army, but he is within his rights to move about our kingdom with his guards.”

Christina kept up her questioning attack, but Duke Arbor continued answering her in an aloof manner. However...

“Reiss has used the Heavenly Lions in an attempt to capture Flora and myself on multiple occasions. For example, when the Heavenly Lions made their bold raid on the mansion I was residing in here in Galarc. Were you also in agreement with that?”

“Hmm? I have no idea what you’re referring to.”

When Christina made reference to the recent attack on the Galarc Castle, Duke Arbor’s expression changed just the slightest.

“I intended on staying as a neutral party for this negotiation, but my kingdom was also a concerned party in regard to this incident. If the mercenaries attacked my castle on your behalf, then it would be considered a clear act of hostility against the kingdom. I suggest you take this chance to explain the truth.”

Here, Francois joined the conversation, encouraging Duke Arbor to explain himself.

“If you’re going to say that, Your Majesty, then your kingdom’s support of the Restoration could also be considered hostile interference in our kingdom’s politics. I would love to hear your explanation of your intentions as well,” Duke Arbor said, returning the question brazenly.

“Our kingdoms had once formed an alliance against the Proxia Empire, yet you made a friendly approach to the Proxia Empire without a word of explanation to us. At the same time, in contrast, you one-sidedly started to distance yourself from our kingdom. Seeing these actions caused my kingdom

to harbor suspicion towards the Beltrum Kingdom,” Francois stated clearly, without hiding the truth.

“Does that explain everything?” he asked, shrugging with a composed smile.

“Will you not be answering His Majesty’s question? I’m rather curious to hear your answer myself,” Christina said, directing the focus back onto Duke Arbor.

“I said I have no recollection of such a thing. What Mister Reiss does abroad is none of my concern. I am not foolish enough to believe your opinions without confirming with Mister Reiss first either.” Duke Arbor shook his head, devoid of any emotions. Whether he was actually unaware or merely feigning ignorance was uncertain. They had no way of confirming the truth. However, merely being able to witness Duke Arbor’s reaction in person was fortunate for both Christina and Francois.

“I see... In that case, let’s return to the topic at hand. I understand how both sides feel about the situation regarding the kingdom, but no agreement can be made like this.” Seeing the discussions were going nowhere, Francois steered the conversation back to the topic of mediation.

“Sure.”

“Very well.”

“Do either of you have a suggestion on a point of compromise?”

“We are prepared to make concessions, after which we hope to hear your conditions for the remaining demands to be met,” Christina said, presenting her compromise plan.

The demands the Restoration first made of the Beltrum Kingdom were to exchange Charles Arbor for the guaranteed status and safety of the Count Claire family and all connected figures. Furthermore, they proposed the use of the Claire territory as a neutral zone, with Count Claire’s people acting as mediators between both sides...

“What specific concessions are you willing to make?”

“The guaranteed status and safety of everyone connected to the Count Claire family. If you accept this condition, we will return Charles Arbor. If you are

willing to agree with the remaining demands, we will also return either the King's Sword Alfred or the Light Blade of Judgment."

"Your response, Duke Arbor?"

"We are willing to accept the former condition as is. However, in regard to the latter condition..."

"If you are unsatisfied with these conditions, we are willing to return both the sword and Alfred. Would you be willing to accept that?"

"I would not."

Christina dangled further concessions before Duke Arbor, but he rejected them with a serious look.

"What part of the condition are you unwilling to accept?"

"As I have said already, the government sees the Restoration as nothing more than traitors. Creating an agreement on equal footing would normally be out of the question. The idea of continuous negotiation is ridiculous. Creating a permanent neutral zone for such negotiation is completely absurd." Negotiating with rebels was unthinkable to Duke Arbor. In modern Earth terms, his view was similar to refusing to negotiate with terrorists.

"While I can understand your point, wouldn't attending this agreement be going against that in the first place?"

"Indeed so. That is why I wish to emphasize this is an extreme exception."

"In that case, will you only be accepting the first proposal from the Restoration for Charles Arbor's return?"

"No... In regard to the second proposal, we are willing to accept the condition that Count Claire's people are used as messengers between the two sides."

With an extremely reluctant expression, Duke Arbor suggested a compromise.

"You won't allow the entire territory to be used as a neutral zone, but you're willing to allow the people to act as neutral envoys?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Did you change Princess Christina's use of the word 'mediator' to

‘messenger’ for a certain purpose?”

“We have no intention of negotiating with rebels. The only words we’ll accept from the Restoration are those of surrender.”

“I see.” Francois accepted with a wry smile.

It sounded like mere wordplay, but as a collective building a society, they couldn’t disregard such pretexts. Only with pretext and purpose could a group of scattered individuals work together towards a goal.

For example, on a battlefield, envoys were often sent into enemy bases before the start of war. But there would never be a neutral zone set up between the two bases. If a neutral zone was placed in the middle of the battlefield, the troops that had gathered to fight could potentially be swayed into questioning the point of fighting in the first place, which would have a huge impact on morale.

With the Beltrum Kingdom in agreement that the Restoration were rebels, it was essential for them to keep treating them that way. If they declared the Count Claire territory a neutral zone, they would lose their justification that the Restoration was a rebel group that needed to be crushed. The only role they could allow as a gray area was a messenger.

I heard he was originally a military noble, but it seems he’s got a clever head on his shoulders as well. He has a good understanding of how to handle politics. Although he was blessed with good circumstances, he seemed to possess the capability to knock down Duke Huguenot from the beginning.

Francois assessed Duke Arbor as a cunning but brilliant man.

“I understand Duke Arbor’s alternate proposal, but it would require some compromise on the Restoration’s side. What are your thoughts, Princess Christina?”

He directed the subject to Christina Beltrum to see how the teenage princess would react to such a cunning great lord.

“We are willing to accept this proposal in exchange for a different condition.”

“And that condition would be?”

“To prohibit the extension of the scope of punishment for obscure reasons such as collective responsibility, and to forbid political purges from being conducted over deeds that haven’t been committed in regard to the conflict between the Restoration and main Beltrum government. Harming any citizens of the kingdom will also be forbidden. I would like to request this as an agreement,” Christina said, presenting her new conditions.

“Are you implying that we conduct our political purges indiscriminately...?” Duke Arbor asked with a daring smile.

“I do not wish to believe it, but the trigger that split the Restoration from Beltrum was the onset of a political purge. There was a movement to strongly censure and criticize who was to blame for the base lost to the Proxia Empire. Am I wrong?”

“A base vital to the kingdom’s defense was captured. The kingdom was shaken by fears that the Proxia Empire’s army would invade in a single swoop. It was only natural to have the responsible party take the blame for negligence in protecting the kingdom from the dangers of the empire.”

“That’s true. But the scope of the natural blame you speak of was too wide in my eyes. There was no logical reason to convict the families of everyone in Duke Huguenot’s faction. Some were demoted, others lost their positions completely, and anyone who protested was accused of rebellion and imprisoned. Even I was placed under house arrest in the castle.”

“House arrest is an exaggeration. Those were measurements to keep you safe, Your Highness. There was a lot of criticism towards royalty at that time. Besides, there are members of Huguenot’s faction that still work in the kingdom today.”

“Are you referring to how those who changed sides to your faction were spared from the purge?”

“Your false accusations are getting excessive. It is truly deplorable.”

“That sounds like a matter of opinion. But I have no intention of arguing about it now. At any rate, the Restoration and main Beltrum government are all parts of the same kingdom. We may be in opposing factions right now, but we both have family and acquaintances on the other side. Would you acknowledge

that as a fact?”

“I suppose I have no means of denying it.”

“Then perhaps you can imagine the fear of having one’s acquaintances penalized just for being in the opposite faction. There are also some who fear their friends and family will be taken hostage,” Christina said, presenting her well-reasoned argument.

“We have no intention of doing such a thing.”

“Neither do I. But there’s no guarantee that everyone in the organization feels the same. If our conflict is prolonged, demands for more purging may appear from within the organization. Voices who endorse such a movement may arise. Barbaric reasoning such as ‘having family on the enemy side is a crime’ could be brought up. Can you deny that possibility?”

“I won’t deny it, but aren’t your hypotheticals rather excessive?”

“Right. Because I’m considering the possibilities.”

Christina tilted her head questioningly. “If either one of us begins a purge, it could trigger a contest of revenge. That would also lower the organization’s morale. It could seriously damage the future of the kingdom. Neither of us would wish for that, right?”

Such cheap lip service... Duke Arbor thought with revulsion.

Indeed, Christina’s proposal was pure lip service. However, it wasn’t just an idealistic thought. It was a sound argument that took careful account of reality, making it an actual possibility.

It was easy to dismiss mere lip service as unrealistic idealism, but it was a different matter when that lip service was a sound argument based on reality.

“Indeed, that would be undesirable.”

Thus, Duke Arbor was unable to deny that either. The world didn’t revolve around lip service. This was the rebuttal that had immediately come to his mind, but while his argument was just, it didn’t sound as good. Applying it to the current conversation would be rather dirty, so it was possible no one would agree with him. He had no choice but to hold his silence.

There were no rules to internal struggles. Hostages, purges, assassination—every means possible was used to obtain victory. It would be a different story if the fact that history was written by the victors could be sugarcoated in a way to gain the agreement of the general public, but alas...

“I’m glad you understand. In that case, will you agree to the condition? Both our organizations will forbid the act of barbaric purges. We will also prohibit any damage done towards the citizens of the kingdom.” Christina smiled at Duke Arbor pleasantly, as though embodying the lip service she was speaking of.

“Very well.” Despite clicking his tongue in his head, Duke Arbor nodded solemnly. The fact Christina was bringing up such lip service as an agreement was proof of just how much she was bothered by the Restoration being labeled as rebels by the more powerful faction. That was why it was important for her to give the organization a clean image. Yet, even though he knew this, Duke Arbor had no choice but to agree to her conditions. It was truly infuriating for him.

What magnificent handling.

Seeing how well Christina had led Duke Arbor into nodding filled Duke Huguenot with relief. The talented First Princess was truly reliable. The only problem was that she was a little *too* talented.

At present, all he had to do was sit there. There was barely any chance for him to speak. If it had been Flora beside him, Duke Huguenot would have faced Duke Arbor on her behalf, but that was unnecessary with Christina. He didn’t have any complaints about that this time, but being unneeded at every negotiation in the future could pose some problems.

“Then, to summarize the meeting up until now. First, the Beltrum Kingdom will guarantee the status and safety of all figures related to the Count Claire family. In exchange, the Restoration will return Charles Arbor. Second, the people of the Count Claire family will act as messengers between the two parties from now on. Both parties will be forbidden from conducting indiscriminate purges in regard to the conflict between the Restoration and the main Beltrum government. Both parties are forbidden from harming the citizens of the kingdom. In exchange, the Restoration will return either the Light

Blade of Judgment or the King's Sword, Alfred Emerle. This concludes the summary. If neither party has any additional claims, we will move on to drafting the agreement..." Francois looked around at the concerned parties.

"We have no further claims to make, but there is one thing I wish to confirm. Since it concerns Count Claire's family, I wish to ask Count Claire for his thoughts on being selected for the envoy role," Christina said, looking at Celia's father, Roland.

"How about it, Count Claire?"

"As a noble, I am prepared to do whatever it takes for the sake of the kingdom's future. I will carry out that duty proudly."

Roland placed his hand over his chest and bowed his head deeply.

"Anything else from you, Duke Arbor?"

"I would like to request the return of both the Light Blade of Judgment and Alfred Emerle if possible, but..."

"You can only pick one. Unless you have anything else to offer, then we can give it some more consideration."

Duke Arbor expressed his desire for both, but Christina naturally had no reason to concede without an alternate offering.

"Then I request the return of the Light Blade of Judgment." Duke Arbor easily chose the sword. "I would also like to request the return of the regalia believed to have been stolen by Princess Christina. In fact, this is the most important demand."

"May I inquire as to why you think I stole the regalia?" Christina asked, cocking her head in confusion.

"Are you feigning ignorance? The regalia used for the succession ceremony was discovered to be missing immediately after you fled from the capital."

"I don't need to feign ignorance, because I really have no idea what you're referring to. I didn't steal it."

The regalia was a symbol of royal authority—a national treasure that belonged to the king alone. Possession of the regalia was proof of the king,

making the inheritance of the regalia from the previous king a prerequisite for succeeding the throne.

“The regalia was stored in the treasure vault within the king’s residence. Only the king’s direct family may enter that area. The only people who know the location of the vault key are the king, the queen, and the first in line to succeed the throne. The key has already been confirmed missing. Who else could have stolen it but you?” Duke Arbor furrowed his brows and shot a sharp glare at Christina.

“Who knows?” Christina boldly cocked her head again.

“H-His Majesty also said this after it disappeared—that the only one who could have taken it was you.”

“In that case, it’s up to my father to judge me. Even if I had stolen the regalia, the only one who could judge me is the king. You can insist I was the one who stole it all you want, but your words have no power.”

“As I stated earlier, as the prime minister, I have been given all of the king’s authority in relation to this negotiation. Thus, you may consider my words to be the words of His Majesty himself.”

“No matter what you claim, I refuse to believe you speak on behalf of my father. I will only believe Father’s direct words. For just like how you consider me a rebel, I consider *you* to be a rebel.”

“That’s quite the contemptuous take.”

Duke Arbor frowned in disapproval. Rather than choosing not to hide his emotions, it appeared he was unable to hide them. It was the greatest display of emotion on his face today.

“If you wish to judge me for the regalia, you’ll have to prepare an opportunity for Father to judge me in person. I am willing to meet with him at any moment. If my father directly addresses this matter, I, Christina Beltrum, vow to face him without running or hiding,” Christina said proudly, speaking with the demeanor of a queen.

Faltering at the pressure of her response, Duke Arbor swallowed his words with a stern look. “Hmph...”

She appears more like a queen than a princess in her teens.

Francois was also impressed by the dignity Christina showed. In addition to that, he addressed Duke Arbor. “With no evidence that Princess Christina stole the regalia, any further questioning will be pointless on your part, Duke Arbor. It will only devolve into a matter of he said, she said. Considering how you put off the topic of the regalia until the very end, I believe you are well aware of this yourself.”

“Fine. I will withdraw from this matter for today. However, do not forget my statements today. If it is discovered that you were the one who stole the regalia, you will have no excuse. Not only you, but the entire Restoration will lose their just cause.”

Stealing the regalia of the king was an act of pure treason. Duke Arbor made sure to emphasize this in a final threat to Christina.

“I know,” Christina nodded with a cool face.

“If both sides have made their claims, we will now move on to drafting the agreement. Speak now if you have any suggestions on the wording of the document.”

Thus, while the rift between the two sides worsened, they were able to reach an agreement. The drafting of the agreement took up the next few hours, making it nighttime before the official article was completed.



The next day, at noon, the same people had gathered in the same room of the foreign guest house as yesterday, facing each other across the table.

The only difference from yesterday was the presence of the hostage to be returned behind Christina: Charles Arbor.

“...”

His father, Duke Arbor, glared straight at him, making Charles look awfully uncomfortable. He probably felt like he was standing on a bed of nails.

“We will now hold the signing of the agreement. The original contract is in both your hands—I guarantee both documents contain the same text. After the

contract is signed, both of you will keep a copy each, while another will be kept in the Galarc Kingdom as the witness copy. Are there any objections so far?" Francois said, an original copy of the agreement in his hand. The same contract with the same text was being held by Christina and Duke Arbor.

"None."

"No objections here."

Duke Arbor and Christina both nodded.

"After signing the contract, both parties will be bound by this agreement. Breaking the contract will be equivalent to sullyng the face of the Galarc Kingdom and myself. Ensure you are signing with that knowledge. Now..."

With that, Francois wrote his signature on the contract before him. They had confirmed the text of the agreement yesterday, so there was no need to read it again. Christina and Duke Arbor proceeded to sign theirs as well. Once they were done with the contract in their hands, they passed it onto the next person and signed the new contract they were handed. Thus, once the contracts were all signed with three names, the agreement was sealed. All three contracts were temporarily collected by Francois.

"With this, the agreement has been settled. First, let's have the Restoration return the hostage."

Once Francois confirmed all three documents were signed, he announced the agreement reached. He then requested the Restoration fulfill their side of the conditions.

"Vanessa."

"Right away!"

Christina shot a glance at Vanessa, who was standing behind her, giving her an order with her eyes. Vanessa immediately removed the shackles from Charles.

"Go on."

"Right..."

Charles, now freed, walked over to stand behind where Duke Arbor was

seated.

“Fool,” Duke Arbor said in a low voice.

“I’m sorry...” Charles muttered with a look of shame.

“As you have been informed of in advance, the Light Blade of Judgment is currently stored safely in Rodania. Count Claire will serve as an envoy and accompany us there, then return it to the main Beltrum government. If Count Claire could come this way, we will inform you of our upcoming plans,” Christina said, summoning Roland.

“Understood.” Roland bowed his head respectfully, moving to stand with the Restoration members. He stopped beside his beloved daughter, Celia.

“...” Celia sent her father a sidelong glance. Roland was looking down at her with a gentle smile. Her father, whom she had been separated from for so long, was right beside her. She was nearly moved to tears, but the agreement signing wasn’t over yet. She held back her tears with all her might.

“This concludes the signing of the agreement. If you have nothing more to discuss, you may disperse.” Sensing the mood of the room, Francois announced the conclusion of matters.

“We will return to the kingdom.” Duke Arbor immediately stood up and marched away in clear discontent. Charles and his other companions hurried after him. This left the members of the Restoration and Galarc Kingdom in the room.

“Thank you very much, Princess Christina,” Celia said first, bowing her head at Christina. Roland also lowered his head in silence.

“I haven’t done anything to warrant your gratitude. We will be departing immediately, but please enjoy your time as parent and child until the count has to return with the Light Blade of Judgment.”

Although she said that, Christina had actually prepared the gift of time for Celia and Roland to enjoy their reunion. After all, she had expected the Light Blade of Judgment to be one of the subjects to come up in negotiations. Yet she had forgone bringing the sword along with Charles and Alfred to the Galarc Kingdom.

The reason for why she had left the Light Blade of Judgment in Rodania was because she had been planning on appointing Roland to retrieve it, giving Celia and Roland more time to be together.

“Ha ha ha. How about a hug to celebrate, my little Celia?”

“No! Not when everyone’s watching.” Celia rejected him with happy tears in her eyes. Seeing her former teacher rejoicing so happily made Christina hope she could keep protecting that smile. However...

With this, the worst risks of the future should be avoided. The conditions have been met. All that’s left is to find the right time to use the regalia...

Although Christina was looking at Celia, she was also setting her eyes on the nobles of the kingdom at the same time. Picturing the future.

However, there were things that even the clever princess couldn’t foresee. And even if she could foresee them, there were things she couldn’t deal with.

The time for Christina to realize that was almost near.



Meanwhile, the group led by Duke Arbor had left the Galarc Castle, boarding the enchanted airship anchored at the lake of the capital.

With an order to the crew to depart as soon as preparations were complete, Duke Arbor brought Charles to the cabin. There, Charles encountered an unexpected figure.

“Long time no see, Sir Charles.”

“M-Mister Reiss...”

Inside the cabin was the ambassador of the Proxia Empire, Reiss. Seated in a chair, he welcomed the Arbor father-and-son duo with a grin. Along with...

Who is this boy? He has black hair...

There was a boy seated beside Reiss who still had youth remaining in his face. His hair was a black color, which raised questions. However...

“Dear me, you sure went through a lot. But I’m glad to see you’re in good health.”

Reiss stood up and congratulated Charles on his return without introducing the black-haired boy.

“R-Right, I’m sorry to have worried you...”

“The rumors would have been rather awful with your son held hostage. Isn’t it great that you fulfilled the minimum goal, Duke Arbor?”

“I apologize for the trouble my foolish son has caused.”

Duke Arbor snorted in displeasure as he sat down heavily in a fine chair within the cabin.

“Not at all, it was beyond your control. His opponent was simply an outrageously irregular case. Sir Charles is not to be blamed,” Reiss said, sitting down quietly

Duke Arbor furrowed his brow in suspicion. “An irregular case?”

“It’s nothing to be concerned about. Rather than dwell on the past, let’s focus on thinking about the future.”

“Concerning the regalia, that shrewd princess feigned ignorance until the end. There’s no doubt she either has it on herself or stored away in Rodania...”

Recalling the conversation with Christina, Duke Arbor frowned in even more discontent. Charles was unable to keep up with their conversation, having just returned from confinement...

“Now that Sir Charles has returned, either option can be dealt with. Oh? What’s the matter, Sir Charles? You seem rather befuddled standing there.”

“N-No, I was just wondering why you’re here...”

“That’s because... Ah, it would be better to ask your father instead.”

“We will now proceed to attack Rodania.”

An immediate raid after a signed agreement. What came out of Duke Arbor’s mouth was the overview of a terribly bold operation.

Chapter 7: Calm before the Storm

In the capital of Galarc, on the main Beltrum government's enchanted airship anchored at a lake near the castle...

"An attack...on Rodania? But you just finished signing an agreement..." Charles gaped in shock.

"It's not like we signed a peace treaty. There was nothing in the agreement about nonaggressive acts," Duke Arbor snorted mockingly.

"Besides, this is the perfect timing for an attack. They won't be expecting an attack on their headquarters right after an agreement was made. Now have a seat, Sir Charles," Reiss said, urging him to sit.

"Even so... Isn't this a little hasty?" Charles asked, sitting down beside Duke Arbor.

"The problem is the regalia Princess Christina took with her. We'll be no match for her if she uses it to claim the succession to the throne," Duke Arbor muttered in annoyance.

"But Rodania is a fortress city."

"I am aware of that."

"There are multiple lookout forts along the border of the territory. Won't the city be fortified by the time the fleet arrives? I doubt their reactions will be slow enough to launch a successful surprise attack..." Charles hadn't acted as a commanding officer for nothing. As soon as he heard the plan to attack Rodania, he listed off the strategic problems that came to mind.

Enchanted airships could fly at a tremendous speed, but the forts were most likely to be equipped with even faster transmission artifacts. If they detected an approaching enemy, the city would be fortified immediately, so any army they sent in would be met by a direct confrontation. The enemy would probably turn the fight into a siege, causing heavy damages on their side if they tried to force their attack through.

While invading was certainly something Charles wanted to do, it was no easy feat to make an attack. If it had been easy, they would have done so long ago.

“Surely you’re not trying to seize the city with sheer resources?” Charles asked, wondering if they were going to attempt to win by making it a war of attrition.

“We have enough military force prepared, but we have another brilliant plan on top of that,” Duke Arbor said, looking at Reiss.

“It is my honor to say I was the one who proposed this plan to Duke Arbor.”

“Mister Reiss... You did? That sounds reassuring... But why?”

“Because on the off chance Princess Christina makes a comeback in your kingdom, it would be undesirable to me as well. Our many years of effort will go to waste.”

“That’s... I am most ashamed.”

“No, it’s all due to the talented subordinates gathered on their side. As a symbol of the friendship between our nations, I was thinking of lending you some of our forces. If you add a certain person to the plan, Rodania will be easily captured,” Reiss said, smiling eerily.

“Is that force you speak of...” Charles looked at the black-haired boy beside Reiss. The boy had remained silent throughout the entire conversation.

“Excuse the belated introductions. This is the hero our nation is supporting, Renji Kikuchi.”

“...Pleasure.” The boy gave a short greeting.

“So he was a hero after all. I’m Charles Arbor. It’s nice to meet you.”

Charles had seen several heroes until now, so he was able to guess Renji’s background from his appearance. He stood up and offered his hand for a handshake.

“Same here.”

Renji seemed to have no intention of shaking hands, giving a blunt response instead. With his hand held out awkwardly, Charles froze. If he hadn’t known

the other was a hero, he would have gotten mad.

“He’s a man of few words, as you can see. He used to be an adventurer, which is where he earned the nickname of ‘Aloof.’”

“Ha ha, what a wonderful nickname.” Charles fixed a polite smile at Reiss’s explanation of Renji’s personality.

“I believe he has the best abilities of all the heroes,” Reiss boasted.

“Sir Renji will lead Mister Reiss and a small squad in a surprise attack on Rodania’s defense force using his Divine Arms. Once the defenses are demolished by the large-scale attack, the rest of the army will invade at once,” Duke Arbor said, giving the outline of the plan.

“That sounds promising... But will it really go that well? The most important part of the plan will be left in his hands...”

Charles seemed to have doubts about adding Renji to the plan, as his words came out rather evasively.

“Are you apprehensive of using Renji as the key of the plan?”

Renji frowned in annoyance at Reiss’s question.

“O-Of course not. I wouldn’t dream of underestimating Sir Renji’s strength as a hero,” Charles said, defending himself in a fluster.

“In my opinion, most kingdoms place more importance on using their heroes politically. They undervalue the powers of the hero. Because of that, there tends to be reluctance towards using the heroes as a potentially expendable force.”

“I am aware that the Divine Arms are powerful weapons...”

“Newly summoned heroes are only able to use upper class to top class attack magic. That makes them quite powerful already, but they’re actually able to attack on an even larger scale as the legends say. Duke Arbor has already witnessed that power,” Reiss said, looking over at Duke Arbor.

“Indeed I have. I determined that more than adequate results can be expected from him. That is why I agreed to including him in the plan.”
Seemingly recalling the time he was shown Renji’s power, Duke Arbor nodded

after a subtle pause.

“The Beltrum Kingdom has a hero as well, but he cannot handle his power that well yet. Thus, I thought of lending Renji,” Reiss said, explaining how he came up with the idea of lending Renji’s power.

“I get that Sir Renji has a considerable amount of power... But are you sure? Your hero’s safety cannot be guaranteed if he joins our army’s operation.”

We will not take responsibility if anything happens, Charles implied with his words.

“It’s what he wants for himself—a chance at more real combat experience, that is. He is aware that all injuries from joining this operation will be his own responsibility.”

“How brave of him...”

Silently playing the hero was enough for one to be worshiped by a nation, so voluntarily stepping onto the front lines sounded like quite the whimsical decision. The nation itself normally wouldn’t want to expose the hero to dangers that could risk their lives either—or so Charles thought.

“I prefer the lifestyle of a mercenary or adventurer over a hero. I don’t want to be treated as some decoration. Just think of me as a skilled mercenary you’ve hired.”

“I see.”

From that statement of Renji’s, Charles more or less saw through to his true nature. The fact he called himself a skilled mercenary showed clear confidence in his combat abilities.

“A man’s honor is to be recognized for his accomplishments. As a fellow man who makes a livelihood off conflict, I share that opinion.”

Because Charles also had high confidence in himself, he was quite fond of others with similar confidence. Undiscouraged by Renji’s blunt attitude earlier, he extended his hand to Renji with an even brighter smile.

“Right...”

Renji remained seated, but returned Charles’s handshake with an annoyed

shrug. He immediately released his hand, but Charles was content with that and sat down. With their greetings exchanged, Duke Arbor gave his orders to Charles.

“The goal of the operation is to gain control of Rodania and secure the regalia Princess Christina pocketed. Thus, the operation will be executed as soon as the princess returns to Rodania. Charles, you will lead a number of Aerial Knights and accompany Sir Renji and Mister Reiss on a reconnaissance mission.”

“I will be leading a reconnaissance squad? It’s such a small number...”

Normally, it would be unthinkable for a soldier of high noble status like Charles to be left in charge of a reconnaissance squad. Thus, Charles failed to hide his confusion.

“I’m giving you a chance to regain your honor. It wouldn’t be a good look to have you lead a large force right after returning from a hostage situation. Reconnaissance within the city will be conducted by mercenaries hired by Mister Reiss. All you have to do is make reports to the main force. Once reconnaissance is done, you can join the attack squad with Sir Renji.”

In a reproachful tone, Duke Arbor informed Charles of the intention behind assigning him the mission.

“R-Right. Thank you very much!” Charles accepted in a fluster.

It’s more like he wants him to supervise us. Reiss guessed at the true reason for Duke Arbor’s order. Duke Arbor was an extremely cautious person. He also had his wits about him. Reiss didn’t expect him to trust them fully from the beginning.

In spite of that, Duke Arbor was including Reiss in the operation. That was just how much of an eyesore Christina with the regalia was. Besides, if Renji failed at the attack, he could just retreat his troops, resulting in little risk for Duke Arbor.

“Reconnaissance and surprise are the key elements of this operation. Sir Renji has demonstrated his power already. You can assume victory is safe on our side.”

His desire for his son to succeed seemed genuine. Duke Arbor encouraged Charles with his words.

“We will be working behind the scenes for this mission. The success of the surprise attack will be attributed entirely to Sir Charles. Consider it a congratulatory gift on your release.”

“I am undeserving...”

When Reiss generously offered to pass on the merit, Charles bowed his head quietly.

“No, no, please accept.”

With a friendly smile, Reiss shook his head.

Haruto Amakawa. After becoming a transcendent one, will he remain a man of mere records, or will he intervene for the sake of his former comrades? I will use this battle to find out.

The only one who knew the true goal behind the attack on Rodania was Reiss.



“We’ll be going, then.”

The next morning, Celia was to depart for Rodania with her father Roland and the rest of Christina’s company. She exchanged goodbyes with Miharu, Latifa, and the others in front of the Galarc Castle, accompanied by Roland beside her.

“I am blessed as a parent to know that my daughter has so many wonderful friends. I had a lovely time with you all last night too. Please continue to look after my daughter.”

Roland bowed his head deeply at the residents of the mansion as well. He had been invited to stay at the mansion after the agreement was signed yesterday. Celia had introduced him to everyone, and they held a humble party to get him acquainted with everyone.

“We’ll probably be back in one or two weeks. See you then,” Celia said with an embarrassed grin.

“See you, Celia.”

“Take care.”

“Everyone will be waiting for your return.”

“Let’s have another tea party!”

Latifa squeezed Celia’s hands. Miharu, Satsuki, and Charlotte stepped forward and offered their words of farewell.

“Thank you. Sara’s group will be coming with us, so we’ll be fine.”

Indeed, it had been decided that Sara, Orphia, and Alma would be going as Celia’s guards. Gouki and Kayoko would remain at the castle to guard Miharu and the rest.

“Let’s meet again, Count Roland.”

“I will be looking forward to the day I see you again, Sir Gouki.”

Gouki and Roland exchanged a handshake. The two had hit it off over drinks last night.

“We shouldn’t keep Princess Christina waiting, so we’ll be going now. See you all soon!”

If they departed from the Galarc Kingdom in the morning, they’d reach Rodania before sunset. Thus, Celia and Roland departed for Rodania together.



While Celia and the others were exchanging greetings, Rio and Sora hovered in the skies far above the Galarc Castle. They watched as Celia and Roland headed for the castle gate, while Miharu and the others returned to the mansion.

It seems like Celia’s going to Rodania. Sara, Orphia, and Alma will be going along as her guards.

A telepathic message from Aishia arrived. She had descended in her spirit form, staying just out of detection range of the spirit folk girls’ spirits while watching everything play out from above.

Then they’ll be splitting up as expected. Sora and I will go to Rodania.

They had decided on that in advance. If his friends ever split up, Aishia would protect one group in her spirit form, while Rio and Sora would protect the other. Being in spirit form saved energy and removed the need for

accommodation, so it was ideal for Aishia to move around alone. If the girls with contract spirits were heading for Rodania, then it was better for Aishia to remain in the Galarc Castle.

Got it. Leave them to me.

Thus, it was officially decided that Rio and Aishia would split up for the time being.

Thanks. Do you remember where the masks are located?

Yup, don't worry.

Aishia couldn't wear a mask in her spirit form, so they had hidden them away in preparation.

Then we'll be going now.

With that, Rio turned to Sora. "Let's go, Sora."

"Okay!"

Sora seemed to be happy to be grouped with Rio, as she gave her energetic reply with a grin that bared her cute canine teeth.



It was early afternoon, a few hours before the sun would start moving downwards.

Three Japanese people were gathered in a single room of the Rodania town hall.

One was the Restoration's hero, Sakata Hiroaki. Another was Saiki Rei, who fled from Beltrum Kingdom to join the Restoration, and the other was his underclassman, Murakumo Kouta.

There was one more person in the room—a girl who was born and raised in this world. The daughter of one of the Beltrum Kingdom's three ducal families: Roanna Fontaine.

The four had been focused on a certain task for some time now.

"The first light novel of this world. We're finally halfway through, Hiroaki!" Rei said excitedly, casting his eyes over the text written on a piece of paper.

Indeed, the four were working on the first light novel of this world together. Hiroaki was the author, coming up with the story and penning it in Japanese, while Rei and Roanna were editors that translated the text into this world's language. Kouta was in charge of drawing the requested illustrations. Like this, they had finally completed roughly half of a single volume.

"Yeah. We didn't give any thought to what we're gonna do after it's written, but it's been real fun. Writing the analog way with a paper and pen ain't so bad either."

Hiroaki placed his pen on the table, looking over the creation process thoughtfully.

"I agree. It's kind of like a school club. Do people also make *doujinshi* like this?"

"Maybe..." Hiroaki nodded awkwardly at Rei's earnest excitement.

"Thanks for your help too, Roanna. You've been doing the translation and checking whether it matches the general knowledge of this world the entire time."

He thanked Roanna for her assistance in the light novel's creation, having done all her tasks until now without a single frown or complaint.

Roanna paused her pen and smiled gracefully. "I'm just happy to see you enjoying yourself, Sir Hiroaki."

Feeling truly grateful for her devotion and understanding attitude—

"Uuh... You know, once we're done with this, we should do something together," Hiroaki said awkwardly.

"Oh? Feeling flirty, Hiroaki?" Rei grinned.

"Shut it. You should take Rosa on a date too."

"Yeah, yeah."

Hiroaki and Rei bantered with each other. Rei was officially considered Hiroaki's aide, placing him in a lower position than the hero, but the two were both Japanese people with similar interests, so they were more like a close school senior and junior.

“You should get a girlfriend too, Kouta. How about that Mikaela girl?”

It was at that moment that Hiroaki recalled Kouta and asked after his romantic status. Mikaela was one of Rosa’s friends whom Rei had introduced to Hiroaki once.

“It’s none of your business. I don’t have time for it anyway. I study, train, then draw illustrations for you.”

“I see you’re as stubborn as ever. I’m paying you for every image, so you should have the money to play around. Go and have fun.”

“There’s nothing I want to buy with that money.”

“Then go and take Mikaela out on a date.”

“Hiroaki, this guy still hasn’t gotten over having his heart broken.”

“Aha.”

“Yeah, say what you want,” Kouta nodded apathetically, focused on his drawing.

Just then, a knight entered through the open door.

“Excuse me, Lady Roanna.”

“What is it?”

“Princess Christina and Princess Flora have returned from the kingdom of Galarc.”

“I see. Then I must go greet them. Sir Hiroaki...”

Roanna looked at Hiroaki.

“Sure, go ahead. We’ll be fine over here.”

Hiroaki waved her off without waiting to hear her full sentence.

“Okay. Then if you’d excuse me.”

With a curtsy, Roanna stood up and followed the knight out. This left the three Japanese people in the room.

“Man, that Roanna sure is a good girl. And she’s so cute. Don’t you think, Kouta?” Rei asked.

“Yes, she really is,” complimented Kouta.

“Well, yeah.” Although he seemed a little shy about it, Hiroaki nodded proudly.



While the enchanted airship with Christina and Celia aboard was arriving at Rodania, Charles and the rest of the reconnaissance squad were on standby next to a spring inside the forest beside the city.

The squad led by Charles consisted of five people from the Beltrum Kingdom’s army and six mercenaries prepared by Reiss, including Renji and Reiss himself, making a total of twelve. It was a small squad, but they all had griffins to maximize their mobility.

However, there were only six people by the spring right now, including Charles. They had set up camp here yesterday in order to conduct their reconnaissance on Rodania. Charles and the Beltrum soldiers stood out in their army uniforms, so the plan was to have the mercenaries infiltrate Rodania as soon as Christina arrived.

The ship that Christina was on board had returned to Rodania roughly one hour ago. After confirming the airship’s landing on the water, Reiss had taken Renji and headed for Rodania, leaving only the members of the Beltrum army by the spring.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Reiss returned with Renji and the other mercenaries dressed as adventurers.

“Oh, Mister Reiss!”

Bored with waiting around idly, Charles stood up in excitement.

“The airship just now indeed had Princess Christina on board,” Reiss said as he took off his hood. Renji and the other mercenaries also removed their hoods.

“Then...” The time to repay his humiliation was almost here. Charles was overjoyed.

“Yes, please give your report to the main forces.”

“Very well. The sun will be setting soon. It would be better to attack tomorrow morning.”

“I agree.”

At Reiss’s nod, Charles eagerly picked up his pen. He then wrote down the following on the paper on the table:

Please send the main forces to invade Rodania tomorrow morning. Once they arrive, we will make a surprise attack to shake the enemy as planned.

“You two. Return to the main forces and bring this letter to Father.”

Charles took the letter and handed it to two of his subordinate knights.

“Yes, sir!”

The two Aerial Knights saluted him quietly, then mounted their griffins and departed for the main forces in the next territory over.

Chapter 8: Attack

The next morning, shortly after sunrise. Barely anyone had started their day yet, making Rodania completely silent.

All of a sudden, the emergency alarm bell started ringing. Regardless of their social status, the noble class and commoners were equally roused from their sleep.

Princess Christina was no exception either. She awoke in the guest house that was separate to the consulate, dressed in a hurry, then allowed Vanessa to bring her to the central office where all the figures of importance had gathered.

“What is going on?!”

By the time Christina entered, several of the important noble figures had gathered already. Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan were among them.

“It’s an enemy attack. We have received word from the border fort that a fleet of enchanted airships have crossed the boundary from Count Savioe’s territory.”

The lord of Rodania, Marquess George Rodan, gave his report with a grim face.

“From Count Savioe’s territory...? If they fly at full speed, those airships will arrive at this city in around ten minutes.”

Considering the time it took to receive the report, the Beltrum Kingdom’s fleet was likely to take less than ten minutes to arrive. However...

“As you know, there is a lake located three kilometers west of Rodania. The fleet will probably land there.”

The appearance of enchanted airships didn’t immediately signal the outbreak of war. The airships had to land somewhere to let the troops down, after which they needed time to assume their formations and prepare for attack.

“Evacuate all noncombatants of the organization to the Galarc Kingdom while

the enemy troops alight. Mobilize the army and order all civilians to take shelter.”

“Understood. An airship is already being prepared for you to evacuate to Galarc with Sir Hiroaki and Princess Flora,” Duke Huguenot said in regard to Christina’s evacuation.

“Are you telling me to abandon Rodania and flee?”

“It is a temporary evacuation. We will be defending ourselves with the intention to win.”

“In that case, please prioritize Sir Hiroaki and Flora.”

“Are you refusing to evacuate, Your Highness...?”

“It wouldn’t be right for the leader of the organization to flee first. If I choose to run, it will be after I evaluate the situation on the battlefield.”

It seemed that Christina intended on staying in Rodania.

“Very well... The question is who will take command of the defense...” Duke Huguenot wondered out loud, glancing at Marquess Rodan.

“With all due respect, may I be allowed to take command?” Marquess Rodan offered. If Duke Huguenot was second in power regarding the Restoration’s administration, Marquess Rodan was second in power regarding military affairs. The two were the lead advisors to Christina in terms of administration and the military respectively.

“This is your territory, after all. I’ll leave it to you.”

Christina easily yielded command to Marquess Rodan.

“Hey, what the hell is going on?!” Hiroaki burst into the central office. He was accompanied by Roanna and Flora.

“We are under enemy attack. The Beltrum army has crossed the territory border and is marching towards Rodania,” Christina answered honestly, seeing no reason to hide the truth.

“Are you serious...?”

“The enemy fleet will reach the city in a few minutes. There should be a small

window before the fighting starts, during which you will be evacuated to the Galarc Kingdom. The airship is being prepared as quickly as possible, so you should head to the harbor immediately.”

“R-Right...” Hiroaki nodded nervously.

“Flora, Roanna. You two will be heading to Galarc with Sir Hiroaki.”

“What about you, Christina?”

“As the First Princess, I cannot flee before everyone else. If I do have to evacuate, I will do so on a later ship.”

“Then...”

“Roanna, take Sir Hiroaki and go now. Prepare for evacuation immediately.”

Christina cut off Flora to give orders to Roanna.

“Understood. Sir Hiroaki, let us hurry.”

“O-Okay.”

Hiroaki left the room at Roanna’s urging.

“Flora, there’s something I must give you. Follow me. Leave the rest to Marquess Rodan and Duke Huguenot.”

With those words, Christina took Flora and moved to another room.



The chaos happening at Rodania was something Rio and Sora had noticed as well. They had set up the stone house outside the city yesterday, so they had also been woken up by the sound of the alarm bells.

The two were currently above Rodania to observe the situation from the skies. The bells rang loudly on the ground below.

“Everyone...”

With his mask in his hand, Rio spotted Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Roland moving from the mansion to the guest house. The sight of that alone was enough to fill him with the urge to rush down. Sora was watching Rio’s expression from beside him with a vexed look.

Until now, there had been no need for Rio to hold himself back from running to his friends. He could ask them what had happened and decide how to deal with things. But right now, Rio was unable to do that. His actions were restricted as a transcendent one.

That is, transcendent ones were forbidden from supporting the interests of a specific individual or group. They could only use their powers for the sake of everyone.

Now that he had become a transcendent one, breaking that rule and fighting for someone would result in Rio losing all his memories of that person. He could intervene without penalty as long as he had this mask Sora had given him, but...

“There are only five masks, Dragon King,” Sora warned.

Unfortunately, they were single-use items, and limited in number. Incidentally, this rule would activate even if Sora moved on Rio’s behalf. In terms of order, as the master, Rio would first lose his memories, which would then cause Sora to lose hers. Thus, Sora couldn’t go to save them either.

“Yeah... Even if we make a move, it’ll be after we assess the situation a little more.”

Rio calmed himself, continuing his observation of the situation unfolding in Rodania.

“Those people no longer remember you, Dragon King. They won’t feel any gratitude if you save them. If you intervene over every little thing like this, there’ll be no end...” Sora mumbled so quietly, not even Rio could hear her words. The reason why she didn’t say it louder was because she had seen Rio’s profile and understood. Rio truly cared about those people down below...

“...” Being unable to do anything but silently watch on had to be extremely painful. Rio clenched his fists without a word.

Meanwhile, seeing Rio like that pained Sora.



At the Rodania guest house, Christina had invited Flora into her bedroom. There, she took out a ring from the safe hidden in her closet and showed it to

Flora.

“Christina, that’s...” Flora blinked.

“You’ve seen it before. This is the regalia used in the succession ceremony of the Beltrum throne.”

“Y-You took it with you?!” Unaware, Flora was shocked.

“Yes. This is an extremely important item, so you must take it and leave for Galarc first,” Christina said, using a cord to tie it around Flora’s neck like a pendant.

“Okay...”

“I don’t have time to explain the details. This is an item to be used in the near future. Until then, you must not show it to anyone. And if anything happens to me, you will be the one—”

“N-No!” In a rare act for Flora, she cut off her sister in a rough tone.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I will look after this, but I’m returning it to you. So don’t say anything like that.”

Squeezing the regalia underneath her clothes, Flora objected to Christina’s unfinished sentence with a tearful look.

“...Fine.” Christina nodded with a gentle smile. Just then, a panicked knock came from the door.

“Come in,” Christina called out.

Vanessa opened the door and stepped inside. “We’ve received more contact from a nearby fort. The enemy fleet has been spotted in the distance. Please return to the central office immediately.”

“All right. Vanessa, take Flora to where Sir Hiroaki and Roanna are. Once you’ve escorted them to the harbor, return to the office.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Thus, Christina returned to the central office.



“Professor Celia...”

Christina was greeted by the addition of Celia and Roland in the central office. Sara, Orphia, and Alma had accompanied them as guards.

“Duke Huguenot has explained the situation to us.”

“In that case, you should all head to the harbor immediately. The airship is preparing to depart right about now.”

“Okay...” Celia nodded hesitantly. She wanted to say she’d stay behind, but she didn’t know if she’d be of any use doing so. Besides, if Celia said she wanted to stay, Sara’s group might say the same. But they were outsiders—she couldn’t drag them into her personal matters, so she restrained herself.

“Count Claire, you head to Galarc too.”

“...Understood.”

Roland probably wanted to stay back as well. But after a brief look of hesitation, he nodded slowly.

With the situation as it was, there was no telling if Duke Arbor’s faction would adhere to their agreement. Yet at the same time, Christina’s side couldn’t act against the agreement either. If Roland offered his assistance here, he would be breaking the position of neutrality he previously agreed to.

“Go now. Everyone, Professor Celia’s safety is in your hands.”

“Right.”

Entrusted with Celia, Sara and the others nodded.

“I see them! It’s the main government’s fleet!”

One of the upper nobles in the office pointed out the window and shouted. The office window looked over not only the city, but far past the city walls. He was pointing at the fleet of enchanted airships in the distant sky.

“They’re here. Now hurry!”

“Okay!”

Celia and the others rushed towards the harbor.

“Deploy the Aerial Knights for contact with the enemy,” Marquess Rodan ordered. A sorcerer on the veranda fired a signal flare up into the sky using magic. Shortly after, a hundred knights on griffins rose into the Rodanian sky.

There were three hundred Aerial Knights in the Rodanian army, so exactly a third of them had been mobilized.

However, this was merely a demonstration of Rodania’s preparations to counterattack. The standard wartime strategy would be for the incoming fleet to stop on the lake, allowing their foot soldiers to disembark and invade the city. Once the main army’s fleet landed on the water, the Restoration would temporarily withdraw the troops over the city.

But something was wrong. The fleet of airships didn’t show any signs of deceleration. One and a half minutes later, they realized the fleet had passed the lake they were expected to stop on.

“Don’t tell me... Do they intend on charging forward like this?”

Unrest spread throughout the central office. It wasn’t because it was a bad move for them, but rather because they were unable to understand what the enemy was thinking.

To the Aerial Knights, an airship was an easy target. Capturing a city by rushing the whole fleet at it was considered a suicidal move. Even if a portion of the ships landed in the city’s harbor, the loss of all the other ships would be devastating. The foot soldiers would be isolated in the city with no cover in the air. Thus, rushing at a city siege with a fleet like this was considered one of the worst plans possible.

“Send the counterattack force to attack, but leave the backup unit behind. Concentrate fire at the approaching airships.”

Marquess Rodan followed the common practice of warfare, immediately giving his perfectly reasonable orders for the situation.

“R-Right away!”

The sorcerer on the veranda fired another magic signal flare, sending out the

orders. Soon, eighty new Aerial Knights had joined the others in the sky.

“That’s...” Just then, Christina and the others noticed a group of people on griffins, approaching from a different direction to the fleet.

“That appears to be the enemy’s vanguard.”

“Such a small unit like that? Impossible, there must be more troops...”

The incoming enemy unit was formed of a mere twelve soldiers. Considering how Rodania was a fortress city, there didn’t seem to be enough force for them to be a special attack unit. In fact—

“They’re being far too reckless. Are they trying to die?”

As Marquess Rodan said, it was a suicidal act. They were completely outnumbered. The moment they neared the city, they would be surrounded by the counterattack force and suffer concentrated fire from every angle.

Sure enough, the Aerial Knights stationed above Rodania noticed the approaching unit. A few dozen knights moved to intercept them, creating a circular formation to surround them.

“Is that...a demi-dragon? Are they Proxian forces?” Duke Huguenot spotted a single demi-dragon among the enemy’s forces.

“But even so, a single demi-dragon can’t...”

One creature couldn’t possibly have any effect on the suicidal outcome, Marquess Rodan decided implicitly. However, this judgment of his had been made on the assumption that the twelve people approaching were all regular Aerial Knights.

“Wha...?”

It wasn’t long until the upper nobles of the Restoration would learn that someone could be so powerful, they could overturn their entire knowledge of warfare.



Several minutes prior, once the city bells were ringing and the Beltrum fleet had drawn near, Charles and his squad began their attack on Rodania.

They all mounted up and departed from the camp by the spring, advancing towards Rodania ahead of the main fleet. They continued flying until they were on the edge of the detection range of the Rodanian troops, where Charles called out to Reiss in a worried voice. “W-Will everything really work out like this, Mister Reiss? If we continue charging forward, the enemy will notice the attack.”

Reiss scolded him lightly from the griffin beside him. “As I told you multiple times before we departed from the spring, just believe in the power of the heroes that dominated the Divine War.”

During the planning stages of the attack, Charles had received a detailed explanation of everything. However, as the fortress city of Rodania drew closer, the apprehension within him increased as well.

His hesitation was most reasonable as well. Invading a city with this many people was pure recklessness. The moment they charged at the enemy troops, they would immediately be surrounded and subjected to focused fire.

No matter how amazing the hero’s power was explained to him in words, it was only natural for him to have his doubts until he witnessed Renji’s immense power in person.

However, the defending Rodanian troops had already noticed their approach. The rhythm of the ringing bells changed. Griffin-riding Aerial Knights rose to the sky above Rodania.

“It’s too late to turn back now,” Reiss said cheerfully.

“Indeed so. I will believe in you!” Charles had also prepared himself.

“Move as planned! I will charge forward and draw the enemy’s attention. You all stay back!” Renji called out to his comrades, showing no sign of fear.

The mercenaries accompanying Reiss were all members of the Heavenly Lions. Among them were members who had participated in the attack on the Galarc Castle, such as Lucci, who had inherited Lucius’s sword, and Arein.

“Heh. That’s some confidence,” Lucci muttered bitterly, but he slowed down as ordered. It seemed he had some faith in Renji’s power. Reiss, Arein, and the other mercenaries also decreased their speed. Charles tugged the reins of his

griffin to follow suit.

The winged lizard Renji was riding was the only one to accelerate towards Rodania.

The vanguard of Aerial Knights from the Restoration had already begun to surround their squad. They began to chant their attack spells as Renji came within range.

“Here he goes.” Reiss chuckled at the sight of countless spells closing in on Renji. In the next moment, Renji swung his halberd Divine Arms.

“Wha...?!”

The rain of attack spells was erased in a single wave of frosty air. That wave proceeded to swallow up the Aerial Knights, freezing them over in the blink of an eye. The cold air could be felt even by the squad behind Renji. Thus, as he watched the frozen enemies fall out of the sky—

“Ha... Ha ha ha!” After a brief loss of words, Charles burst into exhilarated laughter.

“Your woes were needless. See?”

“Yes, I can see now that they were completely unfounded worries. How wonderful! With this power, we could control the city all by ourselves!” Charles shouted excitedly. If the same attack was used on the ground below, the city’s defense would be annihilated in an instant.

“If damage to the city didn’t matter, then perhaps. But the hero’s attack hits far too wide of a range; it would cause devastation to the city itself. The best option would be to leave the ground troops to our soldiers, as planned.”

Was their goal to take over administration of the city, or to reduce it until nothing was left? The tactics behind a war naturally changed according to the goal.

“Indeed. Greater damages will hinder tax collection after occupation. I can’t believe such basics slipped my mind—my excitement got the best of me. We will continue with obtaining control of the air as planned and aim for control of the harbor before the main fleet arrives. Their top figures are most likely

evacuating through the harbor right now.”

Charles repeated the plan out loud to calm himself.

“Very well. The enemy Aerial Knights are completely focused on Renji now. Things are about to get even more interesting.”

The enemy seemed to have realized Renji was a major threat, as they were facing him with far more than a single squad. Almost all of Rodania’s Aerial Knights had been mobilized.

“I will lure as many of the enemy out as possible, then hit them all with a large attack. Make sure you don’t move in front of me!” Renji warned, then charged into the enemy; he clashed with the Aerial Knights protecting Rodania all by himself.

“Guh! Stop him!”

“Surround him and fire your magic!”

The Aerial Knights flew to surround Renji, firing their attack magic with desperation. But each swing of Renji’s halberd created a frosty shock wave through the area, erasing every spell within its range; that shock wave would hit the enemies that cast the spells, freezing them over. The Aerial Knights carefully maintained their distance while they attacked, but Renji had more attack methods than just a shock wave. He created spears of ice one after another, firing them in every direction. One by one the knights fell to the ground, whether it was by freezing over or being pierced by an ice spear.

The entire aerial force of Rodania was completely preoccupied with Renji alone. The rest of the attack squad outside the city were able to watch on leisurely.

“Man, you sure picked up a bargain, Mister Reiss,” Lucci said to Reiss.

“Right? I almost want to scout him for us,” Arein added.

“Whether or not he joins the Heavenly Lions aside, he may be joining you on your missions more often in the future.”

“If every mission were like this, life would be a breeze,” Lucci joked lightly, making the other mercenaries laugh.

The amiable atmosphere around them made it hard to believe a massacre was happening several hundred meters away, but the death of enemy soldiers was of no concern to mercenaries like them. It was merely a daily occurrence for them.

“...”

In contrast, Charles's subordinates were holding their breaths at Renji's overwhelming power. Their expressions were closer to those of fear. What if he turned that power on them? That was the thought that flashed across their mind. Meanwhile—

“What a marvelous sight. To think that the heroes had this much power... Could Sir Rui learn this too?”

The change of position had provided Charles a change of perspective. He wondered if he could get his kingdom's hero, Shigekura Rui, to be an active military asset as well.

While he was entertaining such thoughts, the battle continued. Rodania wasn't the Restoration's headquarters for nothing. Losing here would equal losing their base. Everyone seemed to understand that, as they all fought desperately to repel Renji.

“Heh. Your comrades are being defeated so one-sidedly, yet you're still charging at me without fear. How gallant.”

Renji glanced around at the enemies with an impressed look. Then, he grinned boldly. Part of the reason was because he was purely enjoying the battle, but another part of the reason was because he was pleased that the enemies were deploying exactly as they had planned.

In other words, because Renji was currently deep within the enemy line, Rodania's troops had completely broken their formation. Drawing the attention of as many enemies as possible before taking them all down with a single move was what Reiss had ordered of him.

“Fine... I guess I'll test the power I've learned on this battlefield.”

Everything was set. Renji temporarily retreated to where Reiss and the others were to prepare his magic essence for his next big attack.

Rodania's troops chased after him. But that was a mistake.

"O eternal cold, heed my wish and encroach upon the world."

For some reason, Renji started chanting a line that differed from the other spells of their world.

This was a result of the lessons on spirit arts he had received from Reiss. After being taught that actions and words that enhanced the caster's image of the spell increased the spell's effect, he had come up with his own unique chant. He could control his Divine Arts even without saying anything out loud, but once he had confirmed that the chant actually had an effect, he decided to save it for before he was about to use his ultimate attack.

The strongest attack Renji could do was an ice elemental attack.

"Endless Force Blizzard!"

Renji released a fan-shaped blast the temperature of absolute zero air at the knights flying above Rodania. The atmosphere froze over where the wave passed through, and any knight that touched the air instantly froze as well.

"Wha..."

The Aerial Knights at the rear gasped at the sight of their comrades falling one after another before them.

"R-Retreat!"

When they noticed the visible wave of cold air approaching, the remaining Aerial Knights turned to run from the attack. But the cold wave moved faster than a griffin could fly.

"Ignis Iecit!"

Some of the knights cast one-meter-wide fireballs at the wave, but the flames that burned at over a thousand degrees shattered the moment they touched the air.

More than a hundred Aerial Knights were killed in an instant.



Christina and the others in the central office were helpless as they watched

the Aerial Knights being frozen by Renji's powerful attack.

"Your Highness, Your Excellency," Marquess Rodan said, addressing Christina and Duke Huguenot.

"Yes?"

"The reserve Aerial Knights will be deployed to protect the harbor with their lives. They will buy you the time to flee."

"But Sir Hiroaki and the others only just left..."

The airship that Hiroaki and Celia boarded had left the harbor a mere one to two minutes ago. Christina found it questionable to leave so soon after declaring she wouldn't be fleeing immediately.

However, it was clear her response was just a bluff. After witnessing the defeat of over a hundred aerial troops in an instant, Christina's face was frozen stiff.

"As you can see, the airships in the rear guard are continuously deploying enemy Aerial Knights to attack. It is only a matter of time before we lose control of the air. Once that happens, we will have no means of retreat."

As Marquess Rodan described, Aerial Knights on griffins were taking off from the enemy airships that had decelerated. It was clear that they intended on using those troops to take out the remaining Rodanian knights and seize control of the air, allowing the fleet to land in Rodania's harbor.

"..."

"Above all, we must be wary of that man riding the demi-dragon. That man is bad news. The situation is clearly not in our favor, and any further delay in judgment would be dangerous. Please consider departing," Marquess Rodan pleaded earnestly.

"What will you do?"

"This is my territory."

That's why he would remain. That was Marquess Rodan's answer.

"The residents haven't even finished evacuating yet."

“Have you forgotten the agreement that you just signed?”

“And they’re doing this right after the signing of that agreement! There’s no telling if Duke Arbor will even follow the agreement forbidding any harm to the residents of the kingdom... If I flee here, I will be seen as abandoning the people. We will lose the justification of our organization.”

“That’s why I will remain as the territory lord. As I just said, this is my territory. Responsibility falls on me, not Your Highness. Besides, if it’s the main government that is invading, their goal will be to capture. There will be no justification to be concerned about if our defeat is finalized with your capture, Your Highness.”

“You will still have Flora,” Christina said hesitantly.

“I ask this with all due respect: Do you truly believe Princess Flora could serve as your replacement?”

“...”

“Please consider your own duty carefully.”

Marquess Rodan kneeled before Christina; he had held the number two position in Duke Huguenot’s faction for a very long time. He had done some questionable things over the years to protect that position, but his career was not just for show.

The nobles of Duke Huguenot’s faction valued their reputation and personal interests. However, they never looked down upon the royal family. Their respect for royalty was what allowed them to conduct themselves gracefully as nobility. Of course, not every one of them was like that, but Marquess George Rodan certainly was.

“I understand... I am grateful for your loyalty. But that is why you are too valuable to lose here. Thus, I order you to survive. Do not die. After we have escaped, find a way to live—no matter how disgraceful. When we are reunited, I vow to repay your loyalty.” Knowing just how difficult that would be, Christina chose her words carefully.

“It is my honor to hear that. Your Excellency, I leave Her Highness in your hands.”

“Indeed.”

Marquess Rodan and Duke Huguenot exchanged a serious look and nodded.

Thus, Christina and Duke Huguenot’s evacuation was decided, and they quickly set off for the harbor to board the airship departing after Hiroaki and Celia.



Immediately after Renji used his attack to crush the Rodanian troops...

“...” The overwhelming display of power had left Charles and his subordinates completely speechless.

It seems the important figures have all evacuated to the harbor. Though Princess Christina still appears to be inside the main building...

Meanwhile, Reiss was keeping a close eye on the enemy’s movements. When he spotted Hiroaki, Flora, and Celia on the road from the guest house to the harbor, he sneered.

“Sir Charles.”

“...”

“Sir Charles. Sir Charles.”

“Wh-Wha? Oh, right. Yes, Mister Reiss?” Charles replied, snapping back to his senses.

“We’ve discovered a rat. Your former fiancée is with them.”

“What?” Charles stared in the direction Reiss pointed towards.

“Princess Flora and their hero are there, but our main target is not. Princess Christina is probably still within the building, taking command.”

“Hmm...”

“Our allied Aerial Knights will soon arrive to clean up their remaining troops. Would you like us to seize control of the harbor? You could perhaps go after Princess Christina in the meantime.”

If Charles could capture the leader of the Restoration, he would be

commended greatly. It was an opportune chance to redeem his honor.

“Then... May I leave the harbor to you?”

“Of course.” Charles grinned.



Some time before Renji used his powerful attack against Rodania’s Aerial Knights...

“I’m sorry... I’ve dragged you all into something terrible,” Celia apologized while she waited for the carriage to leave the guest house.

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry for.”

“Yup, we’re escorting you out of our own will.”

“I’m glad we could be here for you.”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma replied brightly.

“Thank you...” Faint tears welled in Celia’s eyes. Roland was watching his daughter and her friends with a warm expression.

Shortly after that, the carriage for the harbor arrived. At the same time, the sky battle between Renji and the Aerial Knights had just begun.

“Wha...”

The spirit folk girls were wide-eyed at the sight of Renji blowing away dozens of attack spells at once. As skilled spirit art casters themselves, they could tell his ability was stupendous.

“Please get on board. We will run alongside you as guards.”

“Okay.”

At Sara’s grim-faced urging, Celia and Roland boarded the carriage. But soon after they departed, at the bottom of the hill...

“Celia, there’s a carriage stopped in front!” The report arrived from Sara outside.



The guarded carriage that Hiroaki, Flora, and Roanna boarded had departed

from the guest house a mere minute before Celia's did.

"Are you serious...?" Hiroaki muttered, face twitching as he looked out the window at Renji's fight.

Is that guy a hero? Who does he think he is, fighting like that...?

When he saw Renji's face in the distance, he realized he was a fellow Japanese person.

What the hell, man?

A chill ran down Hiroaki's spine as he watched Renji continuously use wide-ranged attacks, killing his opponents without a care in the world.

His sensibility was what should have been the norm for a modern Japanese person that grew up with no war or conflict. There were many who would enjoy a harmless mock battle, but this was a real war with lives at risk.

Any ordinary person would feel fear if their peaceful life in town was disrupted by war. Whether or not they had a means of fighting didn't matter. Only those who had received military training would choose to participate in actively killing others—unless they lacked sanity or rationality in the first place, that is.

Hiroaki was an ordinary person. Whether or not Renji was abnormal aside, he was willingly participating in the battle here.

"Whoa!"

Suddenly, the carriage stopped.

"What happened?" Roanna immediately asked the driver.

"We've found more subjects of protection. We were just about to explain the situation to them so that they can come with us to the airship."

"Subjects of protection...?"

Roanna opened the carriage door out of curiosity, sticking her head outside.

"Oh, it's Roanna!"

Someone called her name—it was Saiki Rei, one of the two boys who had been working with her a lot recently.

“Rei, Kouta.”

“What, is it just you two?” Hiroaki said, stepping down from the carriage.

“Hiroaki!”

The two immediately noticed Hiroaki.

“Things are a mess right now ’cause of an enemy attack. You should all get in the carriage as well—”

Hiroaki promptly invited the two to come along, when he noticed that it wasn’t just Rei and Kouta outside. Rei’s fiancée Rosa and her friend Mikaela were with them. There were others that Hiroaki didn’t know the names of, but they seemed to be a large group of noncombatant noble children.

“All right, Kouta and Rei will run. The rest of you won’t fit in the carriage. Rosa and Mikaela, was it? You two get in.”

Hiroaki decided on inviting the two he recognized by face into the carriage.

“Erm...”

They could see that the Second Princess Flora and Roanna of Duke Fontaine’s family were inside the carriage. Lower nobles like themselves couldn’t possibly intrude in the space of such important figures. Rosa and Mikaela attempted to decline the offer, but—

“Go on, get in. Kouta and I are basically friends with Hiroaki, so you’re allowed this much.”

Rei urged the two of them into the carriage, not bothering to give a proper explanation. Thus, the two of them boarded the carriage.

“So why were you all out on the roads?”

“All noncombatants were given the order to evacuate, so we were heading to the enchanted airships in the harbor.”

“Then we’re headed the same way. Let’s get out of here.”

While Rosa and Mikaela were boarding the carriage, Hiroaki exchanged information with Rei and Kouta. Just then, another carriage came down the road leading from the guest house.

“Everyone...?”

The people on board were the late-departing group from the guest house, Celia and Roland. Sara, Orphia, and Alma were escorting the carriage.

“Professor Celia,” Roanna called out as Celia got out of her carriage.

“Roanna... This carriage still has space. Those without a means of self-defense can get on first,” Celia offered to Roanna, immediately reading the situation.

The sky above Rodania turned into a world of ice shortly after that. Renji released his absolute-zero air wave, wiping out the Aerial Knights of Rodania. At the sight of a hundred-odd knights freezing over and falling out of the sky, Celia doubted her eyes.

“Huh...?”

And she wasn’t the only one. Although they hadn’t been touched by Renji’s ice wave, everyone with her was frozen in shock.

“This is bad...” Sara mumbled. As another caster of the ice element, she instinctively knew from that cold wave that he was a greater caster than her.

“Celia, please hurry to the harbor as fast as you can,” she said with urgency.

“Huh?”

“Hurry! If he comes this way, we’re doomed!”

“R-Right! Roanna!”

Celia whipped around to Roanna.

“E-Everyone, hurry to the harbor!” Roanna shrieked, causing everyone there to start rushing away. Hiroaki also made to board the carriage in a fluster.

But before they could set off again, Renji and Reiss rapidly descended to where they all were.

“They’re coming!” Alma screamed, bracing the mace in her hand. Sara and Orphia also prepared themselves for battle, grabbing their dagger and bow respectively.

“Damn it...”

Hiroaki hesitated over whether to get on the carriage or not. He felt like doing so would result in even more danger—so he took out his Divine Arms and readied himself for battle as well.

“Hah!” Renji accelerated on his demi-dragon, gliding rapidly through the air over their heads. He jumped down from the demi-dragon’s back once he passed them, landing gracefully in the middle of the path to the harbor.

He slammed the end of his halberd against the ground. A thick wall of ice immediately rose behind him, sealing the road off.

“The harbor is off limits. You shall not pass,” he announced to Hiroaki and the group before him.

“...”

The group stood there speechless, with one exception.

“Ah... I can tell how you’re a delusional punk trying to live his fantasy daydreams from that one line alone. ‘Off limits’? ‘You shall not pass’? You’re just saying whatever you think sounds cool. But being such a tryhard just makes you look like an idiot instead. Nice way to introduce yourself.”

Was it because he had ascertained that the other was Japanese? Or was it because he believed that other heroes had the same level of strength as himself? Perhaps Renji’s youthful face and small frame made him appear as less of a threat.

The first thing Hiroaki did after opening his mouth was mock Renji.

“What did you just say?”

“You’re a hero, aren’t you? An ice one.”

“And you’re the water hero. Your name was...”

Reiss must have given him information in advance, as Renji seemed to know Hiroaki was the hero of water. However...

“...”

“Well, whatever.”

He had apparently forgotten Hiroaki’s name.

“Then at least tell me yours.”

Renji shook his head in annoyance. “I have no reason to.”

“Then I’ll call you a delusional brat,” Hiroaki said with a smirk.

“I’m a high schooler,” Renji said sullenly.

“Ah? You’re so short I thought you were in middle school. Especially considering the fantasy delusions and all.”

“It seems you want to die today.”



“Ha. If you’re getting so worked up over being called short, you must really be a brat.”

Hiroaki saw straight through Renji’s insecurity and pointed it out. While the two heroes were bickering, Sara’s group got Celia and the others to move back.

“You’re looking down on me, aren’t you? Me, of all people.”

The temperature around Renji dropped even further.

“You’re the one looking down on others. What are you doing all of this for?”

“I’m a mercenary.”

“What?”

“You lot are having a civil war, aren’t you? I was just hired as a mercenary. That’s all I’m doing. But I now have a vendetta against you. That will be my new reason for fighting.”

With those words, Renji pointed his halberd at Hiroaki.

“What a coincidence. I’ve just decided I hate you too. Did you think you’d be a protagonist if you refused to belong to a kingdom?”

“You’d be the background hero that harasses the protagonist until he’s exiled.”

“Man, I hate types like you the most. You’re so in love with yourself, you think you’re the protagonist. You think you’re the most important person in the world, and you think you’re the strongest. Am I wrong? I’d bet you can’t use honorific speech either.”

“You’re not using it either.”

“Hey now, I’m already nineteen. But I suppose a middle schooler like you never spoke politely to your upperclassmen either, huh?”

They bickered back and forth like that. Insults drew more insults, creating a war of words between Hiroaki and Renji. But eventually—

“That’s enough.”

With his anger gauge reaching its limit, Renji readied his halberd for battle.

“Wait, Renji.”

Just then, Reiss arrived. He had descended with Lucci, Arein, and two other mercenaries.

“What, so your name is Renji.”

“...What is it?” Ignoring Hiroaki mockingly calling his name, Renji turned to Reiss impatiently.

“There are many people here who can make themselves useful, so please be aware of your surroundings when you fight. And ensure you knock out the water hero with a blunt blow,” Reiss ordered, getting off his griffin behind Renji.

“That’s a lot of orders.”

“I’m requesting this of you because I believe you can do it. Or is it too hard for you?”

Renji snorted. “Hmph. Piece of cake.”

“And so, please focus on dealing with the water hero. If the others try anything funny, we will deal with them ourselves,” Reiss said, looking over at Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Celia.

“Hello, ladies.”

“You really are a persistent lot,” Sara muttered in annoyance.

“Not always. But we lost Ven and many of our other comrades at your castle, so we’re here to avenge them today.”

Lucci glared at her fiercely, drawing the black sword he had inherited after Lucius. Beside him, Arein drew his sword as well. The other two mercenaries did the same.

“Everyone, stay back.”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma readied their weapons. They were up against four mercenaries, including Lucci and Arein, as well as Reiss. It seemed like they would be forced into a three-on-five battle, when—

“I will fight too,” Celia said, joining them.

“As a sorcerer like Celia, I will offer my assistance to the best of my abilities as

well.”

Unwilling to let his daughter fight alone, Roland joined the rear guard. This made the lineup five against five, but...

“Hey, I’m going to take that brat on myself. If the others move, I want you to deal with them. That sound clear?”

It seemed like Hiroaki desired a one-on-one with Renji.

“Yes... But will you be okay?” Sara asked worriedly.

“I’m a hero as well. Leave it to me.”

It seemed that being up against a younger Japanese boy really had an effect on Hiroaki’s confidence.

“That boy is a formidable opponent. Please be careful.”

Sara was yet to have a good understanding of Hiroaki’s strength, so she hesitated over leaving the battle to him. But she didn’t have the leisure to worry about him either. The opponents they were up against weren’t easy opponents by any means either.

“I’ll let you move first. Use whatever move you want,” Renji said, still pointing his halberd at Hiroaki.

“Ha. Are you kidding me?” Hiroaki furrowed his brow in discontent.

“Not at all. You’ll never win against me. I’m going to teach you that shortly.”

“I’ll take you up on that challenge. Bring it on!”

“Hmph. You’ll soon see the difference between us,” Renji said with a triumphant smirk.

“Since you’re offering so nicely, I guess I’ll go first.”

Hiroaki readied his sword, increasing his magic essence.

Sara and Reiss’s groups were also waiting for Hiroaki to make the first move. They knew he had the tendency to use big and bland moves. The road wasn’t that wide, so they wanted to avoid unnecessarily colliding with his attack.

“Take this!”

Hiroaki shouted, swinging his sword vertically. Enough water to turn the road into a river flowed from his sword, rushing at Renji and Reiss. But neither of them bothered to dodge the attack.

Behind Reiss's squad was the ice wall Renji had created. At this rate, the violent torrent of water would wash them away and smash the thick ice. But Renji pointed his halberd forward and froze the incoming water in an instant.

"Wha..." Hiroaki was flabbergasted.

Then, instead of running on the ice-covered road, Renji started running along the wall of the nearby building, drawing closer to Hiroaki.

"W-Wall-running?! Guh...!"

Despite his shock, Hiroaki attempted to intercept Renji with a slash of water. But even that was frozen in midair.

"Didn't you know?" Renji called out as he leaped off the wall, swinging his halberd at Hiroaki.

"Huh?!" Hiroaki braced his sword to block the halberd.

"Water can't win against ice." Renji leaned right up into Hiroaki's face and smirked.

"You really are delusional... Can you even last five minutes without spouting cliché bullshit?"

Hiroaki pushed back with all his might, forcing Renji and his halberd to fly back towards the wall.

"Oh? It seems you have some physical strength, at least."

Renji used the wall as a foothold to kill his momentum, then leaped from the wall back into the air.

"Dumbass!" Hiroaki used another water slash while Renji was vulnerable in the air.

"Still don't get it?" The water slash froze before it reached Renji, falling to the ground.

"Tch!"

If it didn't work on the first try, it had to work eventually—that was what Hiroaki seemed to be saying by releasing slash after slash of water.

“We won't be able to make a move like this...”

As expected, the clash of two Divine Arms was turning into a dull battle of pure power. They wouldn't be able to intervene like this. Sara's group backed away from the fight to avoid getting involved—with the exception of Orphia, who climbed onto a rooftop to keep an eye on Reiss, whom they couldn't see clearly past all the ice. At present, Reiss and his underlings weren't able to move freely either, so they were watching the fight. However...

Is he bothered by something?

It seemed like Reiss's squad were on guard against something else. As though they expected to be attacked by a third party...

“Feel like giving up yet? You won't be able to win against me.”

“Stop trying to make yourself sound like the superior one. You conceited narcissist.”

“But I am superior to a background character like you. I'll teach you your place.”

“You're not the protagonist! The ice element just screams of a gloomy loner anyway! Go home and dream of imaginary ice spells or something!”

“I already have—Endless Force Blizzard. The spell I used against those flying knights.”

“You seriously did it already? And with such a lame name...”

Their conversation sounded absolutely comical, but the two speakers were completely serious. After all, their attacks didn't cease as they spoke to each other.

Hiroaki was desperate not to lose to Renji, but he eventually ran out of stamina.

“Hah... Hah...”

“Do you finally see the difference in our strength?”

In contrast to Hiroaki's heavy breathing, Renji had a composed look on his face.

"You think you can look down on me?"

"I was ordered to knock you out, you see. I also needed to demonstrate the differences in our strength after you looked down on me. But..." Renji approached Hiroaki, leaning forward to get right in his space.

Here he comes! Hiroaki thought, bracing himself.

"Wh-What?!" But he toppled off-balance. His feet had been frozen, preventing him from moving. Hiroaki looked down at his feet.

When did he...?!

"It's over."

With Renji's voice came a hit to the back of Hiroaki's head. At some point, Renji had rounded behind Hiroaki, striking his head with the handle of his halberd.

"Wha...t...?" Hiroaki swayed. If his feet hadn't been frozen, he would have stumbled on the spot. Instead, he completely lost his balance and collapsed unconscious.

"Urgh..."

When Hiroaki twitched, Renji struck him with the halberd once more.

"Go to sleep."

"Sir Hiroaki?!" Flora and Roanna screamed, having watched the whole battle.

"Grr..."

Sara, Orphia, and Alma each readied their weapons.

"Hmm..." Instead of turning to fight Sara's group, Renji pointed the end of his halberd at Hiroaki's throat. In other words...

"Y-You're taking him hostage?" The girls' faces stiffened.

"Don't bother calling me a coward. This is war. If you don't care about this guy, then come at me. And just so you know, I won't go easy on you for being

women. If you're armed with a weapon, then we're equals," Renji said to Sara and the others in warning.

"Oh, how wonderful. You've truly grown, Renji."

The sound of Reiss's applause echoed along the frozen street. He hopped onto the ice, standing firmly without sliding around.

"So what now?" Renji asked, looking back at Reiss.

"Well, it'd be nice if this were the end, but..." Reiss said.

Just then, bullets of magic essence dozens of centimeters wide came raining down before Renji.



Far above Rodania's skies, Rio was watching the fight between Hiroaki and Renji. Renji had swung his halberd, knocking Hiroaki out.

"..." At that moment, Rio put on his mask in silence. It was a silent indication of his intent to intervene. But just as he began his descent—

"Dragon King!" Sora called out.

"..." Rio paused and looked back at her.

"During the Divine War, the Dragon King used his powers for others many, many times. But all those cases counted towards fulfilling his duty. This conflict between humans is clearly unrelated to your duty. Intervening will definitely activate the rules."

"Yup, I know."

"There's a limited number of masks. Will you still intervene anyway?"

"I'm sorry, Sora. I'm probably going to use up one of the precious masks you gave me."

"That's not something you need to apologize for... That's not... That's not what Sora wanted to say..."

As a transcendent one, Rio had already become a figure unconnected to the residents of this world. Even if he saved them, they wouldn't express any gratitude to him. Or even worse—they might be temporarily grateful to him,

but they'd soon forget about how he saved them. Like a worm-eaten antique book, only their memories related to Rio would disappear.

Sure, the situation might be fine this time. They had a mask on hand. But if he kept intervening in human conflict time and time again, the five masks they had wouldn't last for long. Then, if he intervened without a mask, Rio would lose his memories. The people he saved today would one day become people he wouldn't even think of saving.

Saving them would result in lost memories on both sides. There would be no reason left to fight for someone. It would leave a large, gaping hole within him. That was something Sora had experienced herself, which was why she earnestly pleaded for Rio to reconsider.

"Thank you. But if I don't move here, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. That, I'm sure of. That's why I want to go—that's why I *will* go," Rio said with a gentle smile. Even though the memory loss for both sides should have been terrifying, he knew he wouldn't regret his actions.

"..." At Rio's resolution to sacrifice himself, Sora swallowed her words. At the same time, she realized something—no, she remembered it.

"That's right... The Dragon King has always been this kind of person. He would throw himself at problems for the sake of others, even if no one remembered him, thanked him, or lingered in his own memories. He was always kind to others. That's why Sora..."

Sora recalled the days of one thousand years ago. They would save people even if it meant the people forgot them, and they forgot the people. They would lose all sight of what they were fighting for, yet Sora never felt empty. And that was because...

Because the Dragon King was there.

The overwhelming feeling of loneliness had been drowned out, replaced with kindness. All by the sole presence of the Dragon King.

That's why there was no need to hesitate.

Just like how the loneliness of the disciples was filled by the transcendent ones, the loneliness of the transcendent ones could be filled by the disciples.

“Go, Dragon King! Sora will be with you all the way!” Sora said wholeheartedly.

“Okay,” Rio nodded. He then began his descent while firing bullets of magic essence downwards. The bullets that easily surpassed the speed of sound stopped right before Renji, who had just taken Hiroaki hostage on the ground.

“Huh?!”

At the attack that had seemingly come out of nowhere, Renji abandoned Hiroaki and leaped back.

“So he chose to intervene,” Reiss muttered with an annoyed sigh.

Immediately after that, the orbs of light disappeared. They were replaced by the sight of two people standing beside Hiroaki. The white-haired boy in a mask was naturally Rio, while the other was a hooded Sora. Sora stood one step behind Rio in deference.

So Reiss is alive... Rio stared at Reiss’s face from behind his mask.

“Who is that...?” Roanna asked in confusion. Based on the situation, she had deduced he was an ally, but she had absolutely no idea who it could be.

“Hssshaaah!”

Suddenly, the demi-dragon Renji had been riding hissed at Rio and Sora in fear.

“Silence. Whom do you think you’re in front of?” Sora snapped with a glare. The demi-dragon immediately quietened with a pathetic whine.

“How about we call it a day?” Reiss suddenly offered.

“A day...?” Renji echoed with a suspicious look.

“I can’t do anything about the squad invading the city, but we can at least abandon our post here.”

“Wh-What are you saying, Reiss?! We’ve already come this far!”

From an objective point of view, their victory was all but guaranteed. It was only reasonable for Renji to react to Reiss’s retreat suggestion with anger.

“The Beltrum Kingdom’s Aerial Knights far outnumber the remaining Aerial

Knights of Rodania. We've already won. The city is all but seized already," Reiss said, looking up at the sky to the west.

"Then why would we retreat here?"

"I mean, just look at him. Doesn't he scream of trouble to you? We're just participating in this battle as mercenaries, so there's no need to overexert ourselves here."

"Are you saying this suspicious guy in a mask could defeat me? He might have made a dramatic arrival, but he's standing there completely unarmed!" Renji roared in objection.

"I don't know who you are or where you came from, but you don't want to fight us either, do you?" Reiss asked Rio, ignoring Renji.

Wait... Does he still have memories of me?

Rio stared at Reiss dubiously. His words implied they were meeting for the first time, but there was something fishy about his attitude. Reiss stared back at Rio with an unreadable expression. They sized each other up warily for some moments, but Renji was discontent with that.

"Reiss. If you won't fight him, I will," he said, pointing his halberd at Rio with hostility.

"Well, I won't stop you if you insist," Reiss replied with another sigh.

While they were speaking, Rio instantly defrosted Hiroaki's feet and picked him up in his arms. But just as he turned back to face Sora, Renji attacked Rio from behind.

"Hah!"

He closed in on Rio's back in silence, swinging his halberd with all his might.

"Huh...?!" However, without even a glance behind him, Rio stopped Renji's swing. To be more precise, he summoned a barrier of magic essence at his back, blocking Renji's halberd midair.

Spirit arts...?

The spirit folk girls instantly saw through what Rio had done. Their eyes

widened at the skill required for such a technique.

It wasn't only Sara's group who were surprised. Everyone present at the scene could sense that Rio was a formidable opponent. But whether they all accepted that was another matter.

"Tch! Don't look down on me!" Renji yelled. He immediately began to freeze the air surrounding Rio, probably intending to freeze Rio along with his barrier.

"..." It was at this point that Rio finally looked at Renji. He cast a solid essence barrier against Renji, directly interfering with his ice spirit art. The collision of two opposing spirit arts could only lead to one result: the activation of both arts, followed by the stronger caster overwriting the art of the weaker.

And so, the ice-cold wind never ended up touching Rio. The art that Renji tried to invoke merely dispersed into nothing.

"Ngh! No way! He overwrote it...?"

The exchange of high-level arts had the spirit folk girls astounded.

"U-Urk!"

Immediately after, Rio released his essence barrier, giving it a forward movement. The fixed obstacle became a shock wave, rushing at Renji.

"Ugh..."

As Renji flew through the air, Rio aimed bullets of light essence at his body without any casting motion. But Renji created thick ice to cover the areas he was most vulnerable, blocking Rio's attack.

He's good...

Rio's eyes widened at how experienced Renji seemed at combat.

"Damn it..."

Unable to completely kill his momentum, Renji landed heavily on the ground. With that, he seemed to understand that Rio was far stronger than Hiroaki. He distanced himself from Rio warily, though he still appeared to have the will to fight.

"Sora."

“Yes!”

“Can you bring this person over to the others back there?”

While keeping a watchful eye on Renji, Rio entrusted Hiroaki to Sora. They were the first words he said after arriving at the scene.

Incidentally, they had discussed whether or not to use each other’s names in front of the others, but they had ultimately decided on referring to each other normally, since everyone would lose their memories of them anyway.

“Okay!”

Sora accepted Hiroaki’s unconscious body and swiftly carried him over to Roanna and the others at the back.

That voice...

Where had she heard it before? Celia stared at Rio in a daze, trembling as her heart beat out of her chest.

“Here, look after him.”

“R-Right...”

Sora handed Hiroaki to Roanna to be cared for. After replying nervously, Roanna cooperated with Flora to begin casting healing magic on him.

“Hmm? You’re...” Sora noticed Celia standing still nearby and stared at her face as though she had realized something.

“Sora.”

“Right away!” Sora responded cheerfully to Rio calling her name and returned to him like a loyal puppy, forgetting about everything else.

“Sorry for making so many requests. You saw the lavender-haired girl boarding the carriage at the top of the hill earlier, right?” Rio asked. The lavender-haired girl was Christina. Before they descended here, they had seen Charles’s squad chasing after her while she boarded her carriage.

“Yes!”

“Can you go bring her here safely? I’ll clean things up here in the meantime.”

Saving Christina would probably be considered moving in the interests of a specific individual, but he had already come too far to turn back. Rio entrusted Christina's rescue to Sora as well.

"Leave it to Sora! But with all due respect, if Sora could give one piece of advice..." she said before.

"What is it?"

"Please overpower him as quickly as possible. That's the only way of minimizing the penalty from breaking the rules!"

"Got it."

"Sora will be off now!" Sora saluted him before vanishing, heading for the top of the hill where Christina was. While everyone else watched her depart with open mouths, Rio almost seemed to be smiling in amusement.

"What are you smiling at?" Renji snapped, displeased by the smile he could see on Rio's uncovered mouth below his mask.

"..." Rio didn't reply. He remained silent, which seemed to annoy Renji even more.

"Hey, don't ignore me. You seem to enjoy acting arrogant, but you haven't won yet. This city is done for. Don't think you can get away!"

Renji glanced up at the sky above while taunting Rio. Three hundred Aerial Knights from the Beltrum Kingdom were descending into Rodania.

The Restoration's Aerial knights were being driven back, the one hundred and twenty knights already reduced to under one hundred. They were holding out the best they could in an outnumbered situation, but they would probably decrease in number even faster from here.

The state of this battle will be difficult to turn around, and I can't afford to use any more masks here—I'm only going to use this one. I'll have to limit my intervention as much as possible.

It wouldn't be wise for Rio to fight to the point of turning the war around. Besides, what was more troublesome was Renji's presence—without Aishia here, he would have no means of handling him if his upper high rank spirit woke

up.

It'd be a pain if the hero strengthens his assimilation, so the best move would be to knock him out quickly.

As he thought that, Rio used spirit arts to create a simple dirt stick roughly one and a half meters in length. With the rule that removed memories of himself from other people in place, he had no need to worry about using spirit arts in front of others. In a way, that actually made it easier to fight than before.

“What are you going to do with a tiny stick like that?”

“I’m going to let the people here escape, that’s what.”

That was the first time Rio had answered Renji.

“Let’s see you try. Stop my Cocytus if you can, that is!” Renji snapped in a roundabout way. He then charged straight forward to close the gap between them, swinging his halberd sideways at Rio.

How youthful...

Reiss thought at that moment. He had trained Renji into a formidable opponent, but he still lacked experience.

“Huh?!”

As though to prove just that, before Renji knew it, the stick Rio had trusted forward was right before him. There had been no warning in Rio’s movements before he made the skillful attack.

But Renji hadn’t trained for nothing either. His body didn’t freeze at the unexpected move—instead, he evaded it instinctively.

“Hmph—Wha?!” Renji smirked triumphantly as he took a step back. But in the next moment, he was struck in the back of the head. A pillar of stone had risen from the ground, aiming straight at his skull. Rio had cast his spirit arts from a distance.

“Gah... Ah...” Renji toppled forward, stumbling over his feet.

“Guh?!” The thrust Rio made by stepping forward hit Renji in the forehead, sending him flying backwards to hit his head against the stone pillar once more.

“...”

Having struck his head in the back, front, and back in quick succession, Renji collapsed with a concussion.

“H-Harsh...” Reiss muttered, his face pale after witnessing the merciless chain of attacks. “But refreshing,” he added.

I should knock him out completely...

Rio touched Renji on the head, activating an art to knock him out. He then touched the ice that blocked the road during Hiroaki and Renji’s battle, melting it instantly.

“Wha...”

The disappearance of so much ice caused everyone to stir noisily.

And that leaves...

Rio lifted the unconscious Renji and flung him at Reiss roughly.



He was well aware of Reiss's combat ability. If he chose to flee with wind spirit arts while attacking his surroundings indiscriminately, he would be quite troublesome to deal with. The other mercenaries couldn't be underestimated either, and with the Restoration's forces dwindling by the moment, Rio wanted to avoid a longer battle.

Taking Renji hostage would only create a standstill, extending this battle. That's why it was better to force his unconscious body onto Reiss, reducing his mobility. If they chose to fight in spite of that, Rio would focus his aim on Reiss, who was burdened with carrying Renji. Rio summoned multiple orbs of light to express his intention to fight.

"Whoa, there." Reiss caught Renji's body. But just then... Rio's mask creaked. The crack wasn't visible yet, but the activation of the rules was clearly taking a toll on the mask in his place.

"..." Rio gently touched the mask. He had no idea how long it would last from here. He had to settle things as soon as possible.

But things went as he hoped.

"There's no need to glare so fiercely. We will be retreating immediately—for today. If you all survive your escape, then perhaps we will meet again. Now, if you will excuse us."

Whether Reiss was reluctant to fight Rio because he was carrying Renji or because he never intended on fighting to begin with was uncertain, but he ordered Lucci and the mercenaries to retreat.

"Tch..." The men clicked their tongues, but they mounted their griffins as ordered. They then departed into the skies. Rio considered sending his light orbs after them, but starting another fight now would be troublesome. Merely attacking could be considered moving in the interests of a certain group anyway. He quietly canceled the art around him.

"Master Rio!"

Sora came flying down the hill, carrying Christina and Duke Huguenot under each arm. Behind her, Vanessa and the other guards were chasing her in a panic, their physical abilities enhanced with magic. They were shouting things

like “Hold it!” and “Don’t let her get away!” as they ran after her.

Well... I guess that counts as a mission accomplished.

It seemed like Sora had brought Christina here without giving everyone else a sufficient explanation, but he would have to overlook that. It was an emergency.

“Rio...?” Celia called Rio’s name.

“Huh?” Rio looked over at where Celia was being guarded by Sara and the others. Hearing his name had made him jump, but the rules of the transcendent ones should have applied to them. Neither Celia, Sara, Orphia, nor Alma should have had any memories left of Rio. She had probably repeated the name Sora had called him by—and once he removed the mask and some time had passed, she would forget that name again.

“Sora’s back!” Sora said brightly, landing beside Rio. She set Christina and Duke Huguenot down on the ground.

“Wh-What’s going on?”

“What is the meaning of this?!”

Both Christina and Duke Huguenot appeared to be quite confused.

“Head to the harbor now, while you can. Get on an airship and get out of here,” Rio said to Christina, his mask still on his face.

“R-Right. And you are...?”

“I can buy you some time, but it may not be enough. Hurry.” Rio urged her to move while watching the skies.

“Thank you... Everyone, hurry to the harbor now! Run!”

Once Rio removed his mask, they would eventually forget this exchange as well—but for now, Christina expressed her appreciation towards Rio. The lack of time was also no lie. The thunderous sounds of battle could be heard in the skies of Rodania even now.

At Christina’s urging and the sight of falling Aerial Knights, the group made to depart for the harbor. It was at this point that Vanessa and the other guards

caught up.

“Hey! What...” Vanessa shouted. She wanted to interrogate Sora for suddenly kidnapping Christina and Duke Huguenot, but—

“Vanessa! What are you doing? We’re going to the harbor, make sure you protect the carriage with Sir Hiroaki and Flora inside!” Christina interrupted as soon as she spotted her, scolding her harshly.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness! Everyone! We’re going to escort the princesses to the harbor!”

“Right away!”

Vanessa and the knights joined the group. The carriage with Flora, Roanna, and the unconscious Hiroaki went first, and all the other evacuees followed behind them.

“Let’s go, Sora.”

There was a need to protect Celia and the others, but he couldn’t go along with them. Rio shot them a single, lonely glance before turning to leave with Sora.

“Professor Celia, hurry...”

“W-Wait! Rio!” Christina called for Celia and the others still there to move, but Celia yelled Rio’s name instead.

“...” Rio and Sora paused, turning back around.

“I-I know you. That’s right... How could I forget about you? Rio, Rio...” Celia mumbled, tears rolling down her face.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Celia?” Sara and the spirit folk girls looked bewildered, unsure of what to do.

“Why? Why did everyone forget?” Celia cried, looking at their faces.

“That can’t be possible...” Sora muttered in disbelief. The rules were decided by god, so how could this happen?

“Wait, could it be... That face, that hair color. The resemblance to that homunculus... If so, could this also be Lina’s...?!” Sora gasped, staring intently at

Celia's face.

At that moment, a complex magic circle appeared around Celia's body, causing light to flow from within her. Then...



It worked. It's not possible to give you all of it right now, but I'm entrusting everything I couldn't give that person to you.

"H-Huh...?" Celia was shaken. She glanced around in confusion.

What was that? Is something happening?

Rio was just as bewildered. Every time a transcendent one used their powers, the world would forget their existence. Any identifying information about the transcendent one would be erased from the memories of the people.

Even if the transcendent one interacted with someone while hiding their identity, it was hard for anyone to retain any memories of them. Only their disciples could remember them clearly. That was the rule of the transcendent ones that had been decided by god.

Yet Celia had remembered Rio. An anomalous situation had clearly occurred with the transcendent rules Rio knew.

Why? How?

Confusion and doubt flashed through Rio's mind.

But there were other emotions that rose within him at the same time.

Hope.

Anticipation.

Wariness.

Delight.

A fountain of emotions swelled at the miracle happening before him.

The rules were decided by god. There should've been no way to resist them, so he had actually given up in his heart.

But...

Someone had made a wish.

Someone had tried to change things.

What did it matter if the power meant to be used for the interest of the world was only used for the sake of those he loved?

What did it matter if the person everyone should have forgotten was remembered by someone?

That's why...

That's why this was a tale of defying the somber rules set by god.

A story of regaining lost connections.

It had to be.

Rio prayed with those words from the bottom of his heart.

Epilogue: Reunion

Back at the Galarc Castle...

While the Beltrum Kingdom's fleet was advancing towards Rodania, an enchanted airship from the Centostella Kingdom arrived at the Galarc Castle. It had arrived to take custody of Masato, who had been involved in a new hero summoning, and Lilianna, who had been dragged into the summoning with him.

Discussions over which kingdom the new hero Masato would belong to were about to be held. There was nothing to suggest the discussions wouldn't go peacefully, but the representatives of both kingdoms were tense, fearing the possible complications that could arise.

Meanwhile, unrelated to the two kingdom's discussions were two people meeting again after a long time apart. One with hope in their heart, and one with shock...

"Hey..."

They were reunited once more.

"It's nice to see you again, Miharuru."

Ayase Miharuru and Sento Takahisa.



Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 21 - The Dragon's Disciple*.

This is the first volume released after the first season of the anime finished airing. Five months have gone past in the blink of an eye since the first season ended in September 2021.

As many of you may know already, a second season has been announced for the anime! Please look forward to it, because I know I am! I wonder how far in the story they'll get in the second season. I'm so excited!

But the anime aside, I have one more piece of good news! The drama CD for *Seirei Gensouki* is getting a fourth CD! The release date has been determined already and will be packaged in the special edition of volume 22. Please look forward to what Rio and the others will get up to in the drama CD as well!

As announced in the preview for the next volume, *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 22 - Pure White Equation* will be released in the summer. With all those notices out of the way, I'd like to talk about how things in volume 22 will be influenced by the events of volume 21. Speaking of which, how did you all enjoy volume 21?

There should have been a lot of new information in this volume that hadn't been foreshadowed or mentioned before! At least, that's what I aimed for when writing it, but revealing new plot points as an answer to twenty volumes of foreshadowing made it quite the challenging volume to plan.

While this volume was published by the originally planned date, my writing schedule actually fell behind quite a bit at one point. I'm very sorry to my editor and Riv for all the trouble I've caused. This volume was only released thanks to their huge efforts. They're amazing people—thank you for all you've done! I am borrowing this space to give my apologies and gratitude to you two!

There was a thought that came to my mind while I was writing this volume: I

wished I was smarter. When I was writing the serious developments in the main story, I found there were a lot more scenes that required using my head to write what I wanted to write. I became painfully aware of how much I'd like to be able to write those scenes smoothly without having to rewrite them over and over.

Other than that, I also thought that I'd also like to make a stand-alone spin-off series called *Sir Amakawa's Dining Table* for a change of pace. One where the characters in the story just eat Rio's cooking and react. I'd also like to see their reaction to using soap and the bath. It'd be even better if it was in manga form. I mean, half of that train of thought was just escapism—but that also means I'm half-serious about it! I really want to make it happen!

Getting back on topic, there are still more hints and mysteries about the world that aren't addressed in volume 21. The series should only get more interesting from here, as this volume was just a preparation volume for the things I really want to write from here on. Those of you who read volume 21 probably thought, "Oh my god, things are getting more exciting! Bring on volume 22!" right? I sure hope so!

A reliable new character has also joined the gang as of this volume, so we'll be journeying with her to solve the world's mysteries and regain what was lost... Hopefully!

Finally, I'd like to extend my thanks to all the readers who follow this series and those involved in its production! Let us meet again in volume 22!

Yuri Kitayama

February 2022

Bonus Short Stories

Princess Meets Mermaid

Amakawa Haruto is a Japanese boy who just became a second-year student at his high school.

One day after school, shortly after the new term began, he passed by a girl named Flora Beltrum in the corridor.

The moment Flora saw his face, she greeted him brightly.

“Good afternoon, Mister Haruto!”

Flora was an overseas exchange student who just arrived at their school this spring, and her older sister Christina had transferred into Haruto’s class, so the two were acquainted.

“Hello, Flora. That’s a lot of books you’ve got there.”

Although Haruto was a little confused by being addressed as “mister,” he chose to ask about the ten-odd books in Flora’s arms.

“I was just on my way to return these to the library.”

“You borrowed a lot.”

“I love reading. It also helps my Japanese, and there are so many interesting stories to read.”

“I see. But that must be heavy... Let me help you carry them,” Haruto said, moving before Flora could reply. He took more than half of the books from Flora’s arms, lightening her load by a considerable amount.

“Huh? Th-Thank you. Isn’t it heavy to carry?”

“No, this much is nothing. To the library, was it? Let’s get going.”

“R-Right!”

Haruto started walking towards the library, and Flora hurried to walk

alongside him.

“What kind of books do you like, Flora?”

“I love novels the most. I’m currently looking for a story with a princess as the protagonist. Do you have any titles you could recommend, Mister Haruto?”

“Let me think. What about a fairytale with a mermaid? Oh, but it’s a famous story, so you probably know it already.”

He said the first title that came to his mind, but it was a famous work that any child in Japan would know already. However...

“No, I don’t know that one. What’s it about?”

It seemed that Flora wasn’t familiar with it.

“Hmm. It’s a story about a mermaid princess who falls in love with a human.” Haruto gave a simple summary of the story, not wanting to spoil the plot.

“Oh, that sounds interesting! I’ll go look for it!” Flora’s eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“But I heard the original tale was a little on the darker side...”

“Huh? Really?” Flora asked timidly. She seemed to be afraid of scary stories.

“A picture book of the story wouldn’t be as scary, but it’d be much shorter... I know, there’s a children’s movie based on the story, so maybe you could watch that instead.”

“A movie... Okay! In that case, I can invite my sister and Professor Celia along to watch it together. I’ll go look for it!”

Haruto then gave Flora the movie title, promising to help her look for the movie after school.



The next day, during a break...

“Mister Haruto!”

Flora had come to visit Haruto’s class. Instead of calling for her sister, she searched for Haruto’s face and called his name as soon as she spotted him.

Being overseas exchange students, both Flora and Christina were famous throughout the school. Their elegance and charm made them extremely popular among the second-year boys. And now, the younger one of the two had appeared in a second-year classroom, calling the name of one of the boys.

“...”

The boys—and the girls, for that matter—all fell silent and stared at Haruto. Christina was the only one smiling in amusement.

“Is something the matter, Flora?” Haruto asked awkwardly, quickly standing up to approach Flora. He seemed rather bothered by the stares.

“I watched the movie you told me about yesterday! It was so good, I wanted to thank you for it.”

“I see... I’m glad to hear that.”

Seeing how innocently Flora spoke made Haruto chuckle with a smile.

“A mermaid princess and a human prince. There’s no gap in their social status, but the conflict born from the gap in their species is...”

Flora then began to enthusiastically tell Haruto her thoughts on the movie, drawing the attention of the entire class.

Sibling Time

Inside the Galarc Castle, in the mansion bestowed to Rio by King Francois, everyone in the mansion was preparing to depart for Duke Gregory’s territory in order to face Saint Erica. Unlike the usual harmonious atmosphere of the mansion, the air was tense at the thought of Rio and Erica’s looming rematch.

If that monster appears again... I have to do everything I can to defeat it, Rio thought to himself with determination as he sat on the bed in his room. Then, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in.” Rio wiped the stern expression off his face as he called out to whoever was outside the door. The door slowly opened, revealing Latifa.

“Onii-chan,” she said worriedly.

“What’s wrong, Latifa?”

The reason for her concern was obvious. Thus, Rio made sure to speak in as bright of a tone as possible to reassure his little sister.

“Nothing. I just wanted to stay beside you,” Latifa said, explaining her trivial request while watching Rio’s face for his reaction.

“I see. Come over here, then.”

“Okay.”

Rio patted the bed beside him, inviting her to sit together. Latifa nodded with a look of relief and immediately went over.

“Ehehe.” She clung to Rio’s side and rubbed her cheek against her brother’s arm.

“That’s a little too close,” Rio said with a strained smile. But he didn’t tell her to distance herself; if this was what it took to ease his little sister’s worries, then he’d gladly resign himself to being clung to.

“Onii-chan.”

“Yes?”

“Nothing. Hee hee.” Latifa smiled happily.

“I see.” Seeing her smile made Rio smile too. After that, Latifa continued being spoiled by Rio, enjoying her time with her older brother.

The fight with Saint Erica was to take place the next evening.

A Home to Return To

Galarc Castle. In the mansion bestowed to Rio by King Francois, shortly after Charlotte and Satsuki began to live there as well...

The two had their own rooms in the main castle, but after finding it to be a pain to go to and from the mansion every day, they had rooms within the mansion prepared for them.

However, Charlotte still had to go to the castle for her official duties. Today

was another such day.

“I will be returning to the mansion now,” she said, announcing her departure after completing her usual report.

“Very well,” Francois agreed with a nod, but—

“How has living at the mansion been?” he asked her after she had turned around.

“It’s very fun. Everyone treats me well,” Charlotte immediately replied with a smile.

“I see. You may go now.” Sensing that her words were genuine, Francois chuckled.

“Right. If you would excuse me.”

Charlotte left her father’s office and made her way out of the castle, walking towards the mansion where Rio and the others lived.

But on the way...

What a fresh feeling.

The mansion where everyone lived was located on the same grounds as the castle. She was just moving through the castle, yet the scenery she saw felt so different. Was it because she lived somewhere else now? For some reason, that feeling filled her with joy. Charlotte smiled softly.

Better get going.

She had been so lost in her emotions, she had stopped walking to enjoy the scenery. Charlotte resumed her journey to the mansion.

Once she reached the mansion and walked through the front door, she heard lively voices coming from the direction of the kitchen and dining room. It seemed like everyone was gathered in the kitchen. Charlotte proceeded down the corridor in that direction.

“Welcome home, Char,” Satsuki said, noticing her presence first. The others around her echoed her greeting with “Welcome home, Princess Charlotte.”

“...” Charlotte blinked,

“Something wrong, Char? What are you just standing there for?”

“Oh... I’m just not used to hearing ‘Welcome home’ like this.”

“Oh, I see. Embarrassed?” Satsuki asked with a grin.

“Yes. But I’m also pleased. It’s nice to hear that from other people.”

Charlotte had a sharp, observational eye. That was why she knew that the “welcome home” everyone said to her was because they truly thought it was natural for her to return to this mansion—which was what made her so pleased.

“I see. But it’d be even nicer if we got to hear some words from you too, Char. Words that should be said in response to someone welcoming you home...” Satsuki continued with a suggestive tone.

“I’m happy to be home.” Charlotte immediately answered.

“Yup, it’s great to have you back.” This time, Satsuki was the one to respond shyly. The others also smiled bashfully as they repeated their sentiments.

“That aside, what are you all gathered in the kitchen for?”

“We’re making a snack. Everyone was waiting for your return, Char. It just finished cooking, so let’s wash up and eat together.”

“My, that sounds lovely. I would love to.”

It was just another day at the mansion.



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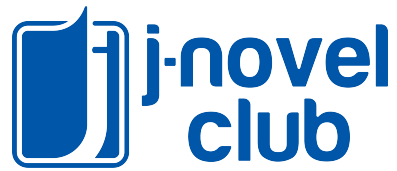
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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 21

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